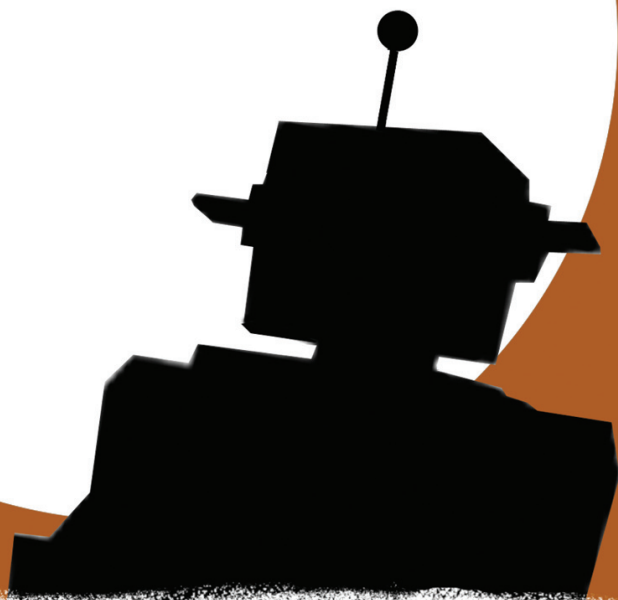


CHRISTOPHER MILLIN

The Healing Sand



BOOK THREE
THE HOLE STORIES

Book Three: The Hole Stories

The Healing Sand

By
Christopher Millin

Crow Toes
press

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Tales From a Playfully Dark World

*For all the wonderful people who helped
me climb out of the hole I had fallen into:
BM, JM, MM, LM, VT, DF, ZM, LS,
KA, MS and JA.*

I am forever grateful...

ONE

One of the uncomfortable side effects of falling into a deep, dark hole is the damage caused by hitting the bottom of that hole. Some people end up with nasty blue bruises, while others get a cut or two. But for a few unfortunate ones like myself, we are prone to breaking bones. And what's even worse than breaking a bone is not knowing it is broken until you are pulled out of the hole five days later.

When I fell into a hole on the way home from my Uncle Sol's funeral, the last thing I was thinking about was my bones. I was too busy thinking about how I could have been so oblivious to the large hole that had been in front of me. I was also too busy thinking about whether or not I should've been afraid of the strange, smelly man who was sitting at the bottom of the hole with me.

My Uncle Sol, who was also a little strange, suffered from the same thing I suffer from. Uncle Sol called it 'soft bones'. My doctor calls it Paget's disease. You may not know it, but your bones are constantly breaking down and growing back. Don't worry, though. It is something that naturally occurs in your body. The process is so slow and so painless you don't even realize it is happening. But in the case of someone like me, someone who has Paget's disease, this process is much faster. And after my bones break down they grow back very soft. This means my bones tend to break a lot easier than most

people's bones. It also means that if there are other things on my mind, like why the man at the bottom of the hole smells so bad, or whether or not I will ever see my family again, I wouldn't tend to notice a broken bone.

I had visited Uncle Sol once after he had fallen and broken his soft hipbone. When I arrived, he called me into his bedroom where he had spent several days confined to his bed. His curtains were drawn and his skin was a shade grayer than the last time I had seen him. Purple bags the size of small suitcases were under his eyes. He told me to close the door and that if I was going to speak, speak very quietly.

"I dare say I haven't slept a wink since my darned hip broke," Uncle Sol whispered to me. "I'm afraid of what he might do to me if I do fall asleep."

"Who?" I asked.

I'm not going to lie to you, in the five or six years before this, nothing Uncle Sol had said had made much sense. One time we were in a grocery store buying asparagus for a soup he was making for dinner and he yelled out at the top of his lungs, "The butler did it!"

"The cat," he said. "That's how I fell. He walked under my feet and tripped me up. I just don't know what I've done to deserve this. I just don't know."

Sparks the cat had been a sweet kitten and grew up to be a loving companion to my wacky uncle. My uncle treated Sparks like the most important person in the world, feeding him only the best cuts of meat and buying him a fat armchair of his very own to sit in while they watched television together. I had a hard time believing Sparks would so callously attempt to injure Uncle Sol, but I had never seen Uncle Sol so serious in all of my life.

It was a week later I found out Uncle Sol had passed away while suntanning in his backyard. It was also a week

later I found out that Uncle Sol's will named Sparks the cat the beneficiary of the entire Sol Burns estate if I didn't show up for the reading of the will. Well, not the entire estate. I was willed a beautiful black leather journal no matter what happened. It is that journal I am writing all of these stories in now. A nice gesture and all, but it was during my walk home between the funeral and the reading of the will that I fell into the hole, relinquishing any hope of me acquiring the Burns estate.

As I stated before, the coincidence of this is sometimes hard to look past...but we are talking about a cat here.

"We're talking about Sparks here, Uncle. Your Sparksy. The cat you'd sell everything you own before having to give him up."

"Keep your voice down, boy. He'll hear you."

And that's when I noticed the shadow of a cat stretching in from the crack between the floor and the bottom of the bedroom door. That's when I heard the sound of claws on hardwood floor. Sparks was listening to us.

"They're always listening to us," Mr. Richard Englebert Flex, the man I met at the bottom of the hole, said to me after I had told him about Sparks, the eavesdropping cat. But Mr. Flex wasn't speaking about cats or skeletons in the closet. He was talking about the worms and the spiders that were all around us. You see, it is very dark at the bottom of a deep hole and it is near impossible to see anything. But when one of your senses is weakened it is widely believed that your other senses become stronger. It happened to Twig after he ate the tomato soup and lost his sight and it happened to us after we had been in the hole a good while. We heard the dirt shifting. We heard the air cooling. We heard our brains spinning. But what we heard most of all was the sound of the bugs moving about around us. I have to admit, it was a little unnerving, especially after Mr. Flex had told me he

could also hear them sharpening their teeth and their knives for the feast they would have when we eventually died.

But let me return to our senses. There are five main senses, those being sight, smell, taste, touch, and vision. At the bottom of a deep hole, all the senses are stronger when the sense of sight disappears. Along with hearing better, smells become more intense. The smell of Mr. Flex was so horrible that just thinking about it now makes me retch. Tasting things like pinecones and earthworms is bad when you're not stuck in a hole, but tasting them when your sense of taste is heightened is even worse. And even worse than that, pinecones and earthworms are all there is to eat at the bottom of a deep hole. There is another sense, however, that people seem to forget about, and I think it is a sense that is heightened when a person is put into a horrible situation, like being stuck in a hole or being stuck in bed after breaking a soft bone. It is a sort of sixth sense I like to call intuition.

Intuition is that ability in us to know something without thinking about it. Intuition tells us it's a bad idea to cross the road without looking both ways. Intuition tells us we shouldn't put more in our mouth than we can chew because we might choke on it. Uncle Sol's intuition told him that Sparks was trying to hurt him. My intuition told me that Uncle Sol was getting crazier. Sometimes, though, when we don't think about things before we act, our intuition can lead us astray.

After Mr. Flex had finished telling me the story about Onus and Twig's adventure in Cygnus Monde, my intuition told me that his next story would continue on with their adventure. My intuition was leading me astray because his next story had nothing to do with Onus and Twig. It was all about a man named Ignatious Crow and it involved both faulty intuition and broken bones.

TWO

Ignatious Crow woke up one morning and found his horse Casper with a shaved mane and a missing saddle. This upset Ignatious immensely, because he had planned to ride Casper to Pleasant Lake that very morning and spend the day combing Casper's golden mane.

Ignatious Crow was a cowboy, a man who rode his horse to work, who slept out under the stars, who ate his beans from out of the can. He had worked a hard week corralling cows and wandering llamas. It was a job that left the skin on his hands cracked and leathery and the bones in his body aching. But Ignatious loved every minute of it. It was a job he had dreamed of doing ever since he was your age, but only achieved after working for years and years as a video game programmer in the big city. You probably think being a video game programmer would be the greatest job in the world and how would anyone not want to get paid for making video games, but if you were to mention this to Ignatious Crow, he would laugh at you and say, "Why don't you try it for a few months and then we'll see how you feel."

So you're probably asking yourself, how does someone go from being a video game programmer to a cowboy? For Ignatious it was a natural evolution. As he spent thousands of hours inside a tiny cubicle staring at a bright computer

monitor writing the code that would eventually become his best selling game, *The Pirate Versus The Alien*, his mind would wander back to his childhood dreams of being a cowboy. Cowboys weren't confined to small spaces. Their world existed on the vast plains of grass and rock that made up the country. It was a complete opposite life to the one Ignatious was living. Freedom was what he wanted, freedom from the walls of his cubicle and freedom from the game production deadlines. The day after he finished his game, he told his boss he had had enough and he walked out of his cubicle for the first time in thirty-six weeks. He packed all of his belongings into his car and he drove to the country where he traded his car and all of his belongings for a horse, a saddle, a pair of boots with spurs, some worn out jeans, and a cowboy hat. For the first time in a long time Ignatious Crow felt free.

Ignatious kicked the dirt and said a few ugly words that would have gotten his mouth washed out with soap when he was a child. "How could I not hear someone do this," he mumbled as he stroked Casper's freshly shaved neck. "You were sleeping right next to me."

The horse neighed and nibbled the hair on top of Ignatious's head.

The thing about living outside and sleeping wherever you lay your head down at night is that sometimes the place you choose to sleep belongs to someone else. Many nights Ignatious was rudely awoken by old men waving big guns in his face. Many of other nights he had had those big guns fired at him as he hopped on Casper and rode off as fast as he could. As free as it was living in the country, often a far greater price had to be paid, like getting your saddle stolen and your horse's mane shaved.

"Clues," Ignatious said. "There has to be a clue or two out here and if there is, I'm going to find it. Whoever did this

is going to pay, or at least apologize. Nothing is ruder than shaving off a horse's mane. Nothing."

Ignatious started by walking a slow circle around the area he and Casper had bedded down on during the night. Casper walked closely behind him. They both kept their eyes on the ground looking for anything out of the ordinary, anything that wasn't earth and wasn't grass. Nothing suspicious caught Ignatious's eye so he moved out ten more feet and walked another slow circle. Casper did the same. The area of this circle was far greater than the first so it took a much longer time to cover, but Ignatious didn't care about time. Someone had made Casper look silly and they weren't going to get away with it.

An hour of searching turned up nothing. Two hours of searching turned up even more nothing. During the third hour Ignatious tripped over a ditch in the ground that hadn't been there the night before. The ditch was a few feet deep and about the length of Ignatious wide. It stretched from the horizon line to the south of them to the horizon line to the north of them. "Now this is an odd clue, isn't it, Casper?"

Casper neighed and clattered his teeth together. He bobbed his head up and down like he was pointing toward something. "What is it, boy?" Ignatious said.

Casper jumped the ditch and stopped. Ignatious followed him up out of the ditch and found another ditch exactly the same as the first one running parallel to it. "This is even more odd now that there are two of them," Ignatious said.

Casper jumped the second ditch and stopped again. He neighed and bobbed his head again. "Something else, boy?" Ignatious said as he climbed up out of the second ditch. There beside the second ditch was a third ditch exactly the same as the first two.

"Now I know these weren't here yesterday because we walked this way to get to where we slept." Ignatious

scratched his head perplexed by the three ditches. "The only explanation is that whoever dug these ditches stole your saddle and shaved your mane. We have to follow them. We have to find the culprit and make him explain why he would do such a horrible thing."

Ignatious climbed up on Casper's bare back. It was a most uncomfortable feeling, but riding Casper without a saddle was the only way they were going to catch up to the ditch-digging, saddle-stealing, mane-shaving culprit. Ignatious knew it took a long time to dig ditches as long and as wide as the ditches they had found, so the ditch-digging, saddle-stealing, mane-shaving culprit couldn't be too far away.

The horse and the cowboy rode along the three ditches for several hours and still no end was in sight. The ditches ran over hills and down into valleys. They crossed through farmland and up into mountain ranges. They looked like scratches a giant cat might make if it had taken a swat at the Earth. Occasionally, Ignatious and Casper would pass a person bending over one of the ditches scratching his or her head just as Ignatious had done when he first saw the ditches. One man asked Ignatious if he knew what made them. Ignatious said, "A man made this ditch and he stole my saddle and shaved my horse's mane."

"What kind of person would do that?" the man asked.

"That is what I am going to find out?" Ignatious explained.

Another of these curious onlookers said he had heard a train passing through during the night, but there had never been a train built anywhere near the town his home was in. He asked Ignatious if trains could run without tracks to run on.

"A train needs tracks to run on," explained Ignatious, "Or it isn't really a train at all. It is an automobile, like a bus or a truck."

Ignatious moved on and met a woman a little further down. She was throwing stones into the first ditch. "This isn't good," she mumbled. "This isn't good at all."

Casper came to a halt next to the woman. "What isn't good?" Ignatious asked.

"This here sign," the woman said.

"Sign?" This here isn't a sign," Ignatious said. "This here is a series of ditches dug by a man, or a group of men who stole my saddle and shaved my horse's mane while they were at it, and I've set out to find them and get me an apology."

The woman threw another stone and looked up at Ignatious who was still sitting atop Casper's back. Her eyes were as white as eggs and both were absent of pupils. "This here is no ditch," the woman said in a voice that was so cold it felt like it was made of ice, and as those icy words entered Ignatious's ears they sent shivers through his body. "This here is a sign of bad things to come, of destruction unlike any man or woman has seen before, of utter and unbelievable sadness. This here is a sign that we should gather up all our worldly possessions and move on out. Things around here en't ever going to be the same again."

The woman threw another stone into the first ditch. Ignatious gave Casper three quick taps on his side, which was their secret signal to leave as quietly (and as quickly) as possible, and the two of them tiptoed away from her. Ignatious didn't believe her one bit. He knew it was a series of ditches dug for the upcoming rainy season. It rained a lot out in the country and the water often caused flooding, which killed off a lot of the vegetation. The ditches were a place where the excess water could drain off, minimizing the flooding and helping with the growth of crops. Ignatious honestly felt it was a good idea, but it was just too bad the people hired to dig the ditches had to be thieves. There was no place for thievery in Ignatious's life and he was bound to

set things straight. He continued on, quickly forgetting the woman's prophetic words, and by prophetic, I mean words that foretell a really bad future.

Riding a horse is usually quite a pleasant thing, but when you are riding a horse without a proper saddle, it becomes more painful than pleasant. At first it hadn't bothered Ignatious, but as the hours wore on and the three ditches continued to run without an end, the pain became more and more noticeable. The pain was in his legs and it was in his bum. It was the constant bouncing up and down on Casper's back that made the pain even worse. With each step Casper took, Ignatious felt his bones loosen a little more from their joints. With every step Casper took, Ignatious felt his muscles tear away from his bones a little more.

The pain didn't stop Ignatious, though, and neither did the setting sun to the west of him. Day was becoming night, which meant the ditch diggers would be resting. They had to rest or they wouldn't be human, and Ignatious knew this. When he programmed his video games he made sure that if the characters you were playing had been fighting too long, or had taken too many pirate sword blows, or had had their arms gnawed off by horribly sticky aliens, those characters would have to rest, or find some sort of secret health pill to get their energy back. It made the games Ignatious programmed a little harder, but it also made them a little more lifelike.

Ignatious yelled, "Hoowah!" and Casper galloped faster.

As the sun dipped behind the hills and only the very top of it was visible, a golden skin of light grew overtop of everything passing by. Green trees grew this golden skin. Fences that broke up each individual farmer's piece of land grew this golden skin. Large boulders here and there grew this golden skin, and so too did the few cows that happened to be wandering around at that late hour.

Many people think that having golden skin is a sign of healthiness, but Ignatious knew that having golden skin meant you had been out in the sun way too long and that maybe it was time to go inside and rub some lotion all over yourself. "The sun is like anything else in life," his mother would say to him before he headed out to the beach for the day. "In moderation, it is a wonderful thing, so warm and so comforting, but if you take too much of it in, just like if you take too much turkey dinner in at Thanksgiving, it can make you sick. Moderation is the key Ignatious."

Whenever we take something in moderation, it means we take it in small doses. A little bit of sun is okay, but too much will make your skin orange and itchy and peel away. A little Thanksgiving turkey is okay, but too much will make you sleepy and feel like you want to throw up. "Had I known these ditches were so long," Ignatious said to Casper, "I would have taken this trip in moderation. Maybe then my bones wouldn't ache so much. Maybe then I would have realized just how silly it is to go after something I'm not even sure exists."

There are many things in this world we should be thankful for that they exist. There are plastic molded toys and candy coated gumballs. Not to mention candy coated pretzels and Brussels sprouts and whatever else we can candy coat, because we all know when something is candy coated it is extremely tasty, even if it is a Brussels sprout. There are movies with robots and big explosions and there are hand-held video game devices that allow us to play *The Pirate Versus The Alien* wherever we want. We should be thankful that our brothers and sisters exist, and if we're not thankful for their existence now, then give it a little time, because one day it'll be a lot easier. And if our mothers and fathers didn't exist, well neither would we, so we should be thankful for them as well. What am I getting at here?

Well, for everything in this world that we are thankful for existing, there are things that are just the opposite. These are horrible, awful things that should never ever have existed, like chores and homework. These are things that make our lives miserable. These are things that make us mumble things like, "Gosh, I wish this never existed," or, "If this never existed I'd be a much happier person."

When Ignatious finished telling Casper that they might be searching for something that didn't even exist, something appeared on a hill way up in front of them. It was actually three somethings that appeared on a hill way up in front of them and these three somethings were very very large.

"Are those trains?" Ignatious said. "Could that man we met earlier have been right? But there aren't any tracks. How can trains run without any tracks?"

But as Ignatious and Casper got closer to the three large objects, the golden skin that covered them revealed that they weren't trains at all. No, these three large objects were something so horrible and so terrifying that Ignatious refused to believe what he was seeing. "It just can't be," he whispered under his breath. He had to whisper because the three large objects appeared to be sleeping and the last thing Ignatious wanted to do was wake them up.

And still closer the horse and the cowboy got to the three large sleeping objects and still Ignatious couldn't believe his eyes. Even Casper was confused. I'm sure if I was able to read a horse's mind I would have read Casper's as saying, "That's not quite right. Those should be in the dirt, no longer than my hoof and no wider than a few strands of hay." All I know is that if I saw what Ignatious and Casper was seeing, I would have turned around and ran away from there as fast as I could. Of course, having heard Mr. Flex's last story, I would have known exactly what I was looking at and therefore wouldn't have been distracted by curiosity

and disbelief as Ignatious was. It was that curiosity and disbelief that carried Ignatious and Casper only a few horse steps from the first large object. Its slimy skin sparkled as it breathed up and down and caught the last light of the setting sun.

Ignatious reached out his hand to touch the slimy skin. Curiosity compelled him to. It was just too hard to believe what was sleeping there in front of him. I'm sure you all know how powerful curiosity can be. Once, my curiosity made me open a closet door after I had heard someone moaning from inside the closet. How crazy is that? I should have run out of the house screaming, "There's someone in my closet!" But I just couldn't believe it. All my doors were locked and all my windows had bars on them. If someone was in my closet, I was more curious as how they could have gotten in there. That curiosity made me open up the door. A lot of times our curiosity makes us do things we regret. Opening that closet door was one of the things I will always regret, as I am sure touching the skin of the large slimy object in front of him is something Ignatious Crow will always regret.

The skin felt like jelly. The harder Ignatious pushed, the deeper his hand went into it. Suddenly, it hit him. The largest worm he had ever seen in his life was sleeping in front of him. The worm was the size of a small building. It was the size of a blimp. The worst part was that there wasn't just one worm...there were three building-sized, slimy worms, and as carefully as Ignatious and Casper had stepped up to them, and as softly as Ignatious had touched the one worm, it wasn't careful or soft enough. The worm's ugly round head lifted up off the ground and turned toward the horse and the cowboy. In the sinking light Ignatious could only see the whites of the worm's hundreds of knife sharp teeth and then the sun completely disappeared and all Ignatious

could see was a giant silhouette looming high above him. The silhouette swung back and forth like a massive kite in a slow wind, and then darted down toward him.

Casper didn't need Ignatious's encouragement. He took control of the reigns, so to speak, seeing as he didn't have any reigns to take control of, and he jumped back, dislodging Ignatious's hand from the worm's slimy skin. The worm's head missed them by a horsehair and smashed into the ground with enough force to send rocks and kitchen table sized chunks of dirt high into the air. As the rocks and the dirt rained back down on them, Ignatious yelled, "Heeyaw!" and did something he had never done before. He kicked his boot into Casper's side.

Again, I'm not saying I know what a horse can think, but I'm sure Casper was a little surprised by Ignatious's action. I'm sure that if he was thinking something, he was thinking, Ow, that hurt a little bit. Ignatious must really be mad right now. Or if he's not mad, maybe he's feeling the same way I'm feeling. Scared. Yes, if he's as scared as I am I can let this one slide, but if he ever does it again I'll buck him off my back so fast.

Of course Ignatious was scared. Wouldn't you be scared if a worm the size of a blimp was trying to turn you into mashed potatoes with its big head? He hadn't even realized he had kicked his boot into Casper's side. It was a basic human survival instinct that made him do it. Don't want to become worm food! Must get out of here as fast as we can! I'm sure we would have all done the same thing.

The worm's head slowly lifted out of the crater it had created when it smashed into the earth and it swung down again. This time Casper turned and ran as fast as his four legs could carry him. He wasn't quite sure which direction he was going because it had gotten so dark, but any direction away from the worms was a good direction.

The sound of thunder erupted across the land. It was the sound of the worm smashing its head into the ground again. It had to be, because the sky was filled with billions of twinkling stars and there wasn't a forecast for rain or storms for several more weeks.

"Faster!" he yelled. "Faster, Casper. Run like the wind!"

I'd say that Casper ran faster than the wind, but there was no wind blowing at the time. Casper was running really fast, though. Casper was running so fast, in fact, had someone been looking out into the dark night and caught a glimpse of them, they might have thought the blur passing by was a rocket or a really big cannon ball.

Casper and Ignatious ran through dark forests and over dark hills. They ran into deep gullies and out of steep valleys. They continued to run so they wouldn't be gobbled up by the giant worms and turned into fertilizer. They continued to run even though Ignatious couldn't see anything behind them. They continued to run even though they hadn't heard a thunderous rumbling sound since the last time they saw the worms several hours earlier. They were still running when the birds began to sing and the first light of a new morning appeared.

The pain tearing through Ignatious's body had become unbearable, but it wasn't going to stop him or make him stop Casper. They would run until they reached a large city where they could duck behind a big brick building and hide in an alley too tight for a worm the size of a blimp. They would hide there until it was absolutely, positively, one-hundred percent safe to leave. How long that would be, Ignatious did not know. All he knew was that being mulched up inside a giant worm's body was not a pain he wanted to suffer and he was pretty sure Casper felt the same way.

But in that early morning light, seeing was near as difficult as it had been in the dark. Everything had a reddish

orange glow to it, but everything was still just a shadow. Casper and Ignatious failed to notice that the large expanse of open land they were running over was full of holes. These weren't holes like the hole I fell into. No, these were mole holes and they were a lot smaller and a lot more plentiful. You probably think that a tiny mole hole is no big worry to a horse and a man. I mean, a mole is no bigger than a small cat, so a hole dug by a mole couldn't be any larger than that. A man and a horse are much larger than a mole, so how on earth could they fall down hole dug by a mole?

As Casper ran across a large expanse of land in the wee morning hours at a speed some might say was faster than a cannon ball, his front right leg, which was no wider than a small cat, stepped into one of the mole holes. The hole was extremely deep so he fell down quite far, tripping him up and bringing his running to an abrupt stop. And by abrupt, I mean, he stopped so quickly and fell so fast that Ignatious was ejected off his back like a pebble is ejected from a slingshot.

Ignatious flew through the air for several seconds, the whole time yelling, "Yeeewahh!"

It is hard to interpret "Yeeewahh", because it is one of those screams that can be used in both a good and a bad situation, and the situation Ignatious was in could either be a good or a bad one depending on how you looked at it. I know I've always wanted to fly and I am sure you have too. I've looked up at the birds in the sky and been jealous of their ability to defy gravity. When I was stuck down at the bottom of the hole, I thought on several occasions, Heck, if only I could flap my arms and fly out of here all my worries would disappear. I could eat normal food again. I could smell like a normal human again and my friends and family would know I was alive. If I could fly I would be the happiest person on the planet. I'm sure had Ignatious

not been running from giant worms and had he been promised that when he landed it wouldn't be on the hard ground, but on a swimming pool sized pillow, his scream of, "Yeeewahh!" would have been one of pure joy. But Ignatious was running from giant worms and it was only hard ground out there in front of him, so I'm pretty sure his scream of, "Yeeewahh!" was one of pure terror.

Ignatious hit the ground so hard that every single bone in his body broke at the same time. The sickening sound echoed across the land spooking birds and small animals for miles around. The sickening sound even spooked Casper, who was in the process of pulling his leg out of the hole it had fallen into. A frightened Casper reared up on his back legs and kicked his front legs at the nothing in front of him. He neighed and snarled and spit and when he dropped his legs back to the ground, he ran off even faster than he had been running when he thought giant worms were after him. He ran off without Ignatious on his back. He ran off leaving Ignatious alone, completely broken, in the middle of nowhere. But that did not matter, because when the human body suffers an immense amount of pain it sends out these little chemicals that put it into a state of shock. The shock dulls the pain and makes you pass out so you don't have to feel it anymore. Ignatious looked out at the diminishing shadow of Casper running away from him. He wanted to yell, "Come back, Casper. It was only the sound of my bones breaking," but the shock was setting in. His head was getting light. The pain that had been so intense was fading...fading...fading. Ignatious's last thought before he passed out was, if nobody finds me I will die out here. I will die completely broken, in the middle of nowhere, all alone. It was not the happiest thought to have before passing out.

THREE

The tiny farmer packed Onus and Twig a supply bag that contained one plastic bottle filled with water, two pieces of leftover birthday cake, a handful of raisins, and a tiny book of jokes, just in case they got bored.

Two hours into their long trek home the cake and the raisins were gone, only a sip or two of water remained and Twig was on the last page of the tiny book of jokes. "Hey Onus," Twig said. "How do you change a pumpkin into another vegetable?"

"Twig, I'm tired of these silly jokes. I don't care anymore."

"Come on, Onus, it's the last one. I promise. How do you change a pumpkin into another vegetable?"

"I don't know, Twig," Onus said.

"You toss it high up into the air and it comes down squash."

"That's not funny, Twig."

"I know, Onus. None of these jokes are very funny, except for that one about the cowboy and the cobra. That one made me laugh. I'm just trying to distract myself from thinking about food. I'm so hungry and I don't know how much longer I can go."

"We should have rationed our food, like the tiny farmer told us to do" Onus said. "'Take a little nibble here and a small sip there. Eat one raisin every hour. That way it will

last you until you get home.' We should have listened to the tiny farmer."

"But Onus, little nibbles and small sips are for rabbits and gerbils. We are human beings and human beings take giant bites and huge gulps. Our stomachs don't fill up if we don't eat like that."

"I don't think the purpose is to fill our stomachs, Twig. The purpose is to keep just enough food and water in us to keep us alive."

"Alive!" Twig shouted. "We need food to stay alive and now there is none. What are we going to do?"

Gromley the mox stopped his slow walk and turned his flat head up at the boys.

"Calm down, Twig. You're scaring Gromley."

"I'm scared," Twig said. "Maybe if Gromley moved a little faster I'd feel better about this whole situation."

"Gromley's moving as fast as he can. It's not his fault we were greedy with our supplies. Don't worry Twig. We'll be alright."

"Okay, Onus," Twig said. But Twig wasn't okay about it. He knew they were nowhere near their home. He knew one more small sip would empty the water bottle and now he knew that without birthday cake, raisins, and water, surviving a long journey was going to be a whole lot more difficult.

The tiny farmer had promised the boys that Gromley the mox could get them home. Somewhere along the line Moxen had been bred with the same tracking gene that bloodhounds and carrier pigeons had in them. All they needed was a smell and they could follow that smell all the way back to its origin. In the boys' case, they used Twig's sock, because it was the smelliest of all the boys' clothing. The sock smelled so bad, the tiny farmer had to plug his nose and use tongs to hold it out for Gromley. Poor Gromley sneezed and reared

back when the tiny farmer stuck the sock in front of his nose. But as soon as the sock was given back to Twig and placed back on his foot and a shoe was put overtop of it, dulling the smell, Gromley began to walk. The boys had to climb up on top of him while he was moving, but it wasn't that hard, because he wasn't moving that fast.

And for the next couple of hours Gromley walked at a slow and steady pace through forests and over hills. He walked down into valleys and onto vast prairie land. He walked so slow and steady that at one point along the way a tortoise appeared next to him. Twig pointed the tortoise out to Onus, but by the time Onus turned to take a look, the tortoise was far up ahead of them. When I say that Gromley was moving slow, I mean he was moving ssslllllowwwwww. Sap spilling from a tree trunk moved faster than Gromley.

Long slow journeys are only entertaining for so long. Pretty soon all the trees start looking the same. Pretty soon all the hills and valleys and clouds start looking the same. Pretty soon all the bad jokes in tiny joke books have been read. And pretty soon travellers on long journeys are only left with their thoughts, because everything else becomes so boring. I wasn't on the back of a mox travelling a route unknown, but when I was down at the bottom of the hole, I felt I was on a long and boring journey. Between Mr. Flex's stories there were long periods of silence. Seeing as it was so dark at the bottom of the deep hole I had fallen into, there was absolutely nothing to look at, so all I had was my thoughts. And as the days wore on and the smells got worse and the inside of my stomach began to itch from eating so many pinecones, my thoughts got darker and darker. I thought about crows snacking on my eyeballs. I thought about rats munching on my earlobes. I thought about worms and spiders.

Onus and Twig weren't thinking about rodents and insects, but they were thinking about horrible things. Yes, the thoughts running through their heads were quite different than the thoughts that had run through my head and I am sure they were quite different than the thoughts running through your head. Right now you're probably thinking, "Are we going anywhere with this?" and "I wonder what it's like to ride a mox?" If that's what you are thinking right now then I will answer your thoughts. Yes. And it's kind of like riding a really slow horse.

Twig's thoughts took him back to the bowl of soup that had started their whole journey. It seemed a million years since he had taken that sip of tomato soup that made him lose his sight. The soup had caused so much trouble. It was horrible soup. But the soup was so very tasty. Oh how he wished he could have a bowl of that soup, even if it did make him lose his sight. Being blind was better than being hungry, or so the hunger made him think. Twig thought about the velvety texture of the soup on his tongue and the way it felt as it slid down his throat. He could almost taste it. Almost.

Onus's thoughts were about Isis; Isis, his twin sister who turned purple when a giant meatball got lodged in her throat. Onus hated that meatball and sometimes he hated himself for letting his sister try to beat him at such a silly contest. Racing to sit in the front seat of the car...seeing who can kick a soccerball the farthest...burping the alphabet the fastest...those were real contests. Sticking balls of meat in one's mouth was not a healthy competition.

Isis promised she would return if Onus was ever in need of help. She wrote it into her contract up there where people go when they turn purple. And in the past week she had returned twice, rescuing Onus and Twig from Fang's dungeon and from the swans that had wanted the boys' hair. Seeing Isis was great, but it always left Onus a little sadder,

because he never got to sit down afterwards and talk with her. He never got to wrap his arms around her and hold her and tell her just how much he missed her. He wished she could rewrite her contract so that she didn't have to go back immediately after he was out of trouble. Even if it was five extra minutes she could spend with him, he would be happy. He wondered if maybe seeing her made him feel worse than not seeing her. He wished his long journey was over so he wouldn't have to think such horrible thoughts.

Onus's thoughts were about to wander to even darker places when Twig tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Is that...Is that a man lying on the ground over there?"

Onus shook his head disintegrating the thought about never seeing his parents again. It was a silly thought anyways. Gromley would get them home. It might take a while, but it would happen. Gromley would get them home.

The land they walked upon was vast and flat. Onus had never seen so much nothingness before. Earth and sky and nothing else. And out in the middle of that vast nothingness a man was lying flat on the ground looking up at a few smokey clouds drifting by. Twig jumped off Gromley's back and ran toward the man.

"Twig! Twig!" Onus yelled. "We don't know that man. What are you doing?"

"There's something wrong with him," Twig said as he ran. "He's not moving."

"Maybe he's sleeping. Twig, let's just keep going home."

Twig stopped running and turned toward Onus. "Maybe he's hurt, Onus," Twig said. "If he's hurt we can't just leave him here."

Maybe he's already...dead, Onus thought. The last thing he wanted to see was another person who was...dead. "Maybe he's..." Onus was about to say dead when a horrible groaning sound came from the man lying on the ground.

"See," Twig said. "There is something wrong with him."

Onus jumped off Gromley and said firmly, "Gromley, stop!" But Gromley kept walking. And walking. And walking. Fortunately, Gromley wasn't moving very fast, so Onus was quite sure they could catch up with him when they were done dealing with the man on the ground.

"My bones!" the man on the ground hollered. "Ooh, my aching bones!"

Onus caught up to Twig and they tiptoed toward the man. "Beware of the people you don't know," Onus remembered his father once saying. "Ninety-nine per cent of the people on this here planet are good people, but that still leaves one per cent who aren't so good. One per cent doesn't sound like a lot, but one percent of billions and billions actually is a lot. It's so many, in fact, that you just can't be too sure of anybody you meet these days. What am I trying to tell you, son? Just be cautious about the people you choose to interact with. You never know if they might be robbers, or murderers, or kidnappers." Onus remembered responding, "Dad, those types of people don't live in our city. Those types of people don't live anywhere near us. I don't think you have to worry about me too much." But as we all know now, there was a bad person living just up the road from Onus and that bad person had bad people all around him who wanted to do very bad things to all the very good people of Arugula. As Onus now knows, a bad person can forever change your life as William Ernest Fang had already forever changed his life.

"Twig," Onus whispered, "What if he's a robber? Or a murderer? Or...or a kidnapper? We're kids and we're all alone out here and we've just been through so much. I don't think I can handle being kidnapped."

"Hello? Hello, is there someone there?" the man lying on the ground said without turning to see if there actually was someone there. "I hear you. I know you're there."

Onus and Twig moved closer to the man.

"I hear your footsteps," the man lying on the ground said. "They sound much different than the clouds passing overhead. I know there's someone there."

"There's actually two someones," Twig said as he stepped up to the man lying on the ground. He leaned overtop of the man, blocking out the man's view of the sky. "I'm Twig and this is Onus."

Onus stepped up next to Twig and smiled a very uncertain smile. The man he looked down on was covered in dirt. A patchy black and gray beard sprouted from his dirty cheeks and dirty chin. He wore jeans that were ripped hip to shin and showed off a purple hue that coloured the skin of the legs inside of them. One of those legs appeared to be bent and broken just like the little metal spurs that were barely attached to the back of the scratched boots on the man's feet.

The man lying on the ground shut his eyes tight and opened them back up. "You're a couple of kids," he said.

"Is there something wrong with you?" Twig asked.

"You're just a couple of kids," the man lying on the ground said again.

"Why aren't you moving?" Twig asked.

"Kids," the man lying on the ground said. "Ahh, but kids wouldn't be all alone out here in the middle of nowhere. Your parents must be here with you. I need to speak to your parents. Hurry up and get your parents! Where are they?"

"Sir," Onus said. "We are out here all alone. We're trying to get back to our parents. Gromley the mox is taking us home. Why aren't you moving your body and why are your legs purple?"

"No parents," the man lying on the ground said. "I am going to die out here. Oh, this is just horrible."

"Why don't you just get up and try walking back to wherever you're from?" Twig said.

"I can't walk, you silly child," the man snapped.

Onus and Twig jumped back startled by the man's sudden anger.

"Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry," the man lying on the ground said. "I have just been out here so long and I'm so thirsty and sore and I miss my horse and like you, I just want to go home."

"What's wrong with you?" Twig asked.

The man lying on the ground took in a deep breath that obviously pained him very much. A tear rolled out of his right eye and fell to the ground where it was quickly sucked up by the dirt and the pebbles he was lying on top of. "All the bones in my body are broken. If I even try to move, the pain makes me pass out. If I pass out one more time I just know the birds and the coyotes will make me their supper."

"How did you break all your bones?" Onus asked.

"I fell off my horse. Oh, Casper, where are you?" the man said as another tear rolled out of his eye only to be stolen by the ground he was lying on. "Oh, I am so very thirsty. You know, a human just can't survive very long without water."

Suddenly, Twig turned and ran from Onus and the man. He ran as fast as someone might run if they were being chased by wild boars or angry mothers. He ran as fast as someone might run if they were in a race to save a person's life and every second counted. "Twig!" Onus shouted. "Twig! Where are you going?"

"What's happening?" said the man lying on the ground. "Where's that boy going? I can't move my neck. I can't see."

Twig's actions confused Onus. It was so unlike Twig to just run off without explaining himself. Onus looked down at the man on the ground. "I don't know where he's going," he said.

"Don't worry," the man lying on the ground said. "Your friend will come back. A friend will never leave another

friend behind. That is why I know Casper will return for me. He is my best friend."

And just as the man lying on the ground finished speaking, Twig appeared next to Onus. He was panting because he had just run so fast. In his hand was the bottle of water the tiny farmer had given them for their journey. "I (deep breath... deep breath)...I thought he might need these last few (deep breath...deep breath)...drops more than we do."

Twig got on his knees and twisted the cap off the bottle. He hovered the bottle over the man and poured the remaining water into the man's mouth. The man's tongue, which wasn't broken, because it was a muscle and not a bone, lapped up the drops that had landed on his chin.

"Oh, that was the tastiest thing I think I have ever had," said the man on the ground. "I can't thank you enough. That kind gesture has prolonged my life. It has given me hope back. Once you lose hope, it is a very hard thing to get back and now I have it."

Twig smiled. He was happy he made the broken man feel better. "But Twig," Onus said as he pulled Twig up off his knees and led him a good distance away from the man lying on the ground. "We don't know how far home is and that was the last of our water. Without water, we too will lose our hope, and maybe even worse, we'll lose our..."

"It's okay, Onus," Twig said. "Something will come along. We'll pass a stream, or a water cooler. I'm not worried."

"Twig, you know there aren't any water coolers out here and we've been travelling a long time and I haven't seen anything resembling a stream."

"Remember what Only told us about being pessimistic?" Twig said, referring to their encounter with Only Balogna in Cygnus Monde, which is now Omniville again. "Right now you are being a pessimist and it's not helping our situation."

"Yes, but Only was an optimist and look what happened to him," Onus reminded Twig. "You can be as optimistic as you like, but nothing can prepare you for an attack by a gang of hypnotized swans. Nothing."

"The swans are gone," Twig said. "We don't have to worry about them anymore."

"The water is now gone, too," Onus said. "That is what we have to worry about now."

Onus tried to speak quietly, because he knew Twig was right about the man on the ground needing the water more than they did, but he was worried, and worried people have a tendency to speak loudly when they speak.

"I see your situation is no better than mine," the man lying on the ground said. Onus and Twig walked back toward him. Both of them felt bad for having shared their conversation so loudly.

"Don't feel bad about wanting to live," said the man lying on the ground. "It is a natural human instinct. I could have easily just given up and died out here, but I knew something or someone would come along and save me."

"But we're just a couple of kids," Onus said. "You said so yourself. And besides, without any water we can't do very much."

The man lying on the ground sucked in another deep breath. This breath must have hurt a lot because both his eyes filled with tears. "I may have been a little quick to judge the two of you at first," he said. "For that, I am sorry. Your journey has been as difficult as mine, be it in a very different way. You are not just strong children – I can see that now – you are strong people, and a strong person has the ability to do whatever it is he or she wants to do."

"What we want to do is go home," said Twig.

"And we can't seem to do that," said Onus.

"Which means we really aren't that strong," said Twig.

"Ah, but you are and you don't even realize it," said the man lying on the ground. "You are, and I have a way to prove it to you."

"We don't want you to prove anything," said Onus. "We just want to go home."

"And this might get you there a little faster," said the man lying on the ground. "You see, I have heard of a place not far from where we are that has what both you and I need. For you, it has water and phones. You can drink to your heart's content and call your parents so they can come and get you. It's always so much better when a parent comes to get you. For me, it has...The Healing Sand."

"The Healing Sand," Twig repeated. "What's that?"

All the man's bones may have been broken, but both the boys could see his eyes smiling. "They say it is where broken things go to get fixed," he said.

"Where is it?" Onus said.

"It's...It's west of here. That's all I know. It's where the sun leaves us for the night. The sun is always the last one to be healed because it has travelled so far over the course of the day. It is weary and broken by the time it sets. It's...oh boys, I am so sorry. The pain is..."

The man lying on the ground closed his eyes.

"Is he...dead?" Twig asked.

"I think he's just sleeping. Look," Onus said as he pointed out the man's inflating and deflating stomach.

"Should we just leave him here?" Twig said.

Onus looked out at the vast emptiness all around him. The only thing he could see other than sky and flat land was Gromley, who was now a small speck on the horizon line, a good five or ten minute jog away from them. "I think we should take him to The Healing Sand," Onus said. "If there are phones there, we may get home faster."

"Onus, we don't even know where The Healing Sand is."

"He said it's to the west, where the sun sets. All we have to do is figure out which way the west is and head in that direction."

"Onus, is this really what we should be doing?"

"We can't just leave him out here to...die. We can't."

The two boys suddenly got quiet and stood silent for several seconds contemplating their situation. Contemplation is something I am sure we all do when we don't know what to do. A good way to describe contemplation is, it's like a wrestling match with your thoughts. One thought is saying, "do this," while another thought is saying, "no, do this." Many times while I was down in the hole, I contemplated digging my hands into the dirt and at least try climbing out, but I knew how unstable the dirt was. I knew I could pull all that earth around us down onto us and then we would have no longer been at the bottom of a deep hole...we would have been buried at the bottom of a deep grave.

"Never Eat Shredded Wheat," Twig finally said, breaking the silence.

"Never eat what? What are you talking about?" Onus said, but Twig did not answer him.

Instead, Twig raised his head toward the sky and searched out the sun. It was almost directly above him. For the next few minutes he stood still watching the sun, without looking directly at it. You never want to look directly at the sun because it will burn tiny holes into your eyeballs. Or at least that's what my late Uncle Sol used to tell me. He also used to tell me he could teach a dog to speak if he had enough time with it, and the dog was willing to learn.

"That's enough," Onus said loudly. Gromley had now disappeared. And that's the funny thing about taking too long to contemplate something. In many cases, by the time you figure out what it is you are going to do, it is too late.

"We've wasted too much time. Gromley's gone and we still don't know what we're doing."

"The sun is moving that way," Twig said as he pointed out the direction the sun was moving. "That means that way is west. Wheat. Never Eat Shredded Wheat."

"If you are trying to be funny," Onus said, "It's not the best time for it."

"The host of the nature show I like to watch said that Never Eat Shredded Wheat is a good way to remember the order of direction," Twig said. Never is for North. Eat is for East. Shredded is for South..."

"And Wheat is for West," Onus said finishing off Twig's sentence.

"The sun always rises in the East and always sets in the West. At least where we live. Other places in the world, it is quite the opposite. We know we were travelling south, because the tiny farmer told us Omniville was North of where we lived. It's simple. West is that way," Twig said, pointing out the direction again. "The Healing Sand is that way."

They had contemplated their situation for a long time, but decided in the end that their best chance at survival was to head to The Healing Sand the man passed out on the ground had mentioned. Listening to a man whose entire body was broken was a silly thing to do, because that man could have been delirious from all his pain and he could have been rambling on about nothing. But the boys realized they had no choice. Their water was gone and if they didn't drink some soon they would dry up like a fallen leaf in the sun, and then their skin would start to crack and peel away from their bodies, and then a wind would pick up all their little pieces and carry them away, and then they would be gone. Forever.

FOUR

"Did they walk?" I asked Mr. Flex.

I had been waiting for him to continue his story for almost an hour and I couldn't stand it anymore. Mr. Flex was a master of the cliffhanger and I sometimes despised him for it. How, I wondered, could you just leave a story hanging with so many unanswered questions? Did they walk to The Healing Sand? Did they carry the broken man? Was the broken man, in fact, Ignatious Crow from the first part of the story? What the heck happened to Gromley?

Pressing Mr. Flex to speak wasn't productive. I learned quickly that his stories were told at his pace, when he wanted to tell them. Of course, his pace was usually very very fast, because of the peculiar way he spoke. But hurrying him, or stopping him mid-point only angered him and kept him from speaking for even longer periods of time. When Mr. Flex didn't speak, it was dead silent at the bottom of the hole. Dead silence is the worst silence, because it has the word dead in it and it reminds you of where you're going to end up if someone doesn't come along and rescue you from the hole you've fallen into.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Flex said after an hour of silence. "I was just thinking about the time I didn't have the necessities of life and I almost left this beautiful planet forever."

"You mean like this time, right now?" I said jokingly. Mr. Flex didn't laugh.

"I was at the top of the highest mountain in all the land," Mr. Flex said.

It wasn't a continuation of the story about Onus and Twig, but it was a story, and he was talking, so for a little while longer I wouldn't have to deal with any dead silence... and that was a good thing. "Mount Triton was so high that half way up the mountain we passed through the clouds," he continued. "They weren't rain clouds, so they didn't soak us. They only tickled our faces as we passed through them. The thing about climbing mountains is the higher you climb, the colder it gets. When you are wet, the cold is even worse. Also, the higher up you are, the harder it is to breath. There is less oxygen at higher elevations so you have to bring your own oxygen with you. Luckily, my father was an experienced mountain climber and he prepared us as well as he could. We had seven oxygen canisters, which would last us the trek up and the trek down. The other thing about mountain climbing is you want to carry as little as possible with you, so my father figured that four canisters of oxygen for him and three for me was exactly what we needed. No more. No less."

"It was just you and your dad?" I said and smacked my head for being so dumb. Luckily, my interruption didn't anger Mr. Flex as it had so many times before. When Mr. Flex spoke about his past he became a different person. Getting him to speak about his past was a difficult chore, but once he was doing it, he was a friendlier, more forgiving man. Instead of going silent for an undetermined amount of time, he immediately answered me.

"My father took me with him on all of his adventures. He always said, 'A great adventurer isn't just born. He, or she, is taught, and the younger a person is taught something, the

more time they have to perfect it. By teaching you now to climb mountains, to race whales, to battle rapids, to outrun tornadoes, I am preparing you to one day be the greatest adventurer of all time.' I was six years old the first time I climbed a mountain. I was eight years old during our climb up Mount Triton.

It was always just my father and me. He said that everyone learns differently. He said if he was to bring someone else with us on our adventures, they would try to teach me their ways as well and it would just confuse me. By only learning one way, I would never be stuck in a situation contemplating which is the better way to get out of it."

"Did your father ever teach you how to get out of deep holes?" I asked. And again I smacked my head for being so dumb. Of course his father had never taught him how to get out of deep holes or he would have been out right after he had fallen in. I was sure Mr. Flex would get angry, but again he answered me immediately and continued on with his story.

"My father taught me hundreds of things, but for some reason he never taught me how to get out of a deep hole. I wish he had. But I can't fault him for that. He was a great man and I miss him more and more, each and every day that passes by.

It took us a day's hike to reach the clouds. It took us another day to reach the peak of Mount Triton. The weight on my back was heavy, so I walked very slow. It didn't matter to my father. He said the walk up was the best part, so it didn't have to be fast. More time to take it all in and enjoy it, he would say. I was so cold and so tired and so sore when we reached the peak that I could barely look around to enjoy it. But even through the excruciating pain, it was undeniable; the view at the top of Mount Triton was breathtaking. So much so that after I was finished looking, I was out of breath.

But that was alright because I had my oxygen with me, or so I thought. The canister I had been using up until that point was empty so I reached into my backpack for another canister. I hooked up my mask and inhaled a deep breath. To my horror, the new canister was empty as well. That was it. I was out of oxygen and we still had a full hike back down the mountain. I ran to my father and told him what was wrong. He told me not to worry. He pulled out one of his remaining canisters and hooked it up to my mask. 'I will take shorter breaths from what is left,' he said. 'If I'm not too greedy with the oxygen I should be able to stretch it until we get back down.' I smiled and took a deep breath in. Again there was nothing. He said not to worry. He said that if we turned right around and started back down that very moment and walked all day and took very very short breaths, the last remaining canister of oxygen should be enough for the two of us. He pulled it out of his backpack and hooked it up to my mask. I took a deep breath in and suddenly felt more frightened than ever before in my life. The last canister was empty as well."

"That can't be,' my father said. 'I checked them all a dozen times. They were full. We had plenty of oxygen.'"

"My head became light and I collapsed onto the icy ground. My father dropped to his knees and whispered in my ear, 'It's going to be all right, son. It's going to be alright.'"

"All I remember thinking was, there's too much to see and too much to do. I can't leave this world now."

Mr. Flex stopped speaking for a moment.

I wanted to say, "But Mr. Flex, you didn't leave, because you're here with me, trapped at the bottom of this hole." But before I could say it, Mr. Flex said, "But I didn't leave, thanks to a man named William. William saved my life and he saved the life of my father. For that I will always be grateful."

Mr. Flex always finished a story. Even though his tale about being at the top of a mountain with no air to breathe

was far from being resolved for me, I knew that somewhere along the way he would finish it. He constantly left me hanging, but he also constantly kept me listening and maybe that was his plan all along.

In most cases two hungry ten-year-old boys would never have the strength to lift a grown man and carry him a great distance, however, the broken man was surprisingly light. Onus held the man under the arms and Twig held the man's legs. At an old turtle's pace they headed west. As they walked, the boys could feel the man's broken bones moving around inside his body. It was a sickly feeling, but what made the feeling even worse was the bones made an awful rustling sound with each step they took.

"I don't know if I can do this," Twig said.

"You can do it, Twig," Onus said. "You have to do it. If you close your eyes it almost feels like we're carrying a bag of freshly raked leaves."

"That's not very funny," Twig replied. "If I close my eyes I might run into a tree or start walking in the wrong direction."

"Not the whole time, Twig," Onus said. "Just close your eyes for a second or two."

Like always, Onus was right. When Twig closed his eyes he was no longer carrying a broken, unconscious man. In his hands was a big bag of leaves he and Onus had cleared off the Livesay's front lawn.

"We can pretend we're walking the bag of leaves to the back alley where the garbage man can pick them up," Twig said. "And maybe we can even pretend that once we're done, your dad will give us a couple of dollars each and we can run up to the corner store for some candy."

"I like that idea," Onus said.

For the next two hours the boys trudged along landscape

that changed very little. Each wavy hill they climbed and descended and each scooped out valley they descended and climbed looked no different than the last. High above them the sun led the way, never once getting too far ahead that the boys were out of sight of it, unlike a certain mox we all know. Once in a while they stopped to take a break and check if the broken man was still alive. During these times it seemed the sun waited for them. Life is usually an easy thing to deduce. If someone is walking and talking they are usually alive, unless they are a zombie or a mummy. If someone is asleep, we sometimes think they might not be alive, especially if they're not snoring. But if we look hard enough, we can usually see his or her chest rising and deflating with each breath. The broken man wasn't walking and talking and his chest wasn't rising. It was a very faint hissing sound coming from inside the man that reassured them there was still hope. To hear this sound, the boys laid the man on the ground and one of them placed an ear close to the man's mouth. The hissing sound got quieter each time they checked.

"He's going to...he's going to end up in the same place as Isis if we don't find that sand place soon," Twig declared after hearing nothing more than a wisp of a hiss. "In fact, we're all going to end up with Isis. I don't know how much longer I can go without water."

The existence of The Healing Sand was not a question in Onus's mind. Even if it sounded unbelievable, he had to believe in it. His past experiences in Arugula and Omniville taught him that the world was full of unbelievable things. "Just because you don't see them," his father once said about lake monsters and armless postmen, "doesn't mean they aren't real." Just because they had never seen The Healing Sand, it didn't mean it wasn't a real place.

"The Healing Sand has got to be close," Onus said. "We won't end up..."

"It is close," a very quiet, hissing voice said cutting Onus off. The broken man was awake. The boys knelt down next to him and moved as close as they could to him so they could hear him clearly. His eyelids fluttered as he looked up at the sky. "In the corner of my eye I see a large boulder. If you look at it long enough and hard enough it takes on the shape of a man's face. They call it 'Fickle's Rock.'"

The boys looked and saw the boulder the broken man spoke of. It looked nothing like the face of a man.

"His nose...his nose points in the direction of The Healing Sand. Follow Fickle's nose," the broken man said before once again passing out.

The boys ran over to the boulder and stared at it for several minutes. "I don't see a face," Twig said. "All I see is a big dumb rock with a dozen bits and pieces that could be noses. If we follow the wrong one, that'll be it for us."

"We still know The Healing Sand is to the west of us so that rules out all the pieces pointing in all the other directions," Onus said. "That means that if we face east while we're looking at the boulder we should be able to see this Fickle fellow."

The boys put their backs to the sun and stared at the boulder. "Do you see anything yet?" Twig asked after a minute of staring.

Onus clenched his fists and his teeth and opened his eyes wide. His focus was so intense he didn't hear Twig. The boulder was still a boulder. What am I doing wrong, he thought? Why can't I see the face in the boulder? Onus closed his eyes and opened them quickly, but it did not change the appearance of the boulder in front of him.

"Maybe we're not looking at it the right way," Twig said. This time Onus did hear him.

"But the broken man said that if you look at it long enough and hard enough, only then will you see it," Onus said.

"I know, but I was just thinking about a book my mom gave me for my birthday last year," Twig said. "It was filled with all these pictures made up of hundreds of the same image. There was this one with hundreds of little spaceships lined up in row after row."

"That doesn't sound very exciting," Onus said.

"No, it isn't," Twig said. "But if you hold the book up in front of your face at arm's length and you try to look through the spaceships, the image of a green alien appears. I think if we try to look through the boulder instead of at it, we might see Fickle and his nose."

"We're not superheroes, Twig," Onus said. "Only superheroes can look through solid things like rocks."

Twig knew that humans didn't have the ability to look through solid objects. If they did, the expression, "behind closed doors" would become irrelevant. Everybody would be able to see everything. Crime would drop and less people would pay to go to sporting events. They'd just stand outside the arena and watch through the walls. Twig also knew that it didn't hurt to try looking at the boulder his way. He turned away from Onus and looked at the boulder again, but this time he tried to look through it. And as he looked, a funny thing happened. The boulder got fuzzy. Twig opened his eyes as wide as he could and refocused on the boulder. When it came back into focus Twig could see what looked like the face of a man carved into it. "There," he said and pointed at one of the pieces in the middle of the rock. "That's Fickle's nose."

Onus looked at the piece of rock Twig said was Fickle's nose. "I don't see it," he said.

"That's because you're not looking at it the right way," Twig said. "There's his forehead and there are his cheeks. That little piece down there is his chin. I think Fickle even has a moustache."

"I still can't see it," Onus said.

"Then you'll have to believe me when I say that piece is his nose and it is pointing that way," Twig said as he turned and pointed in the same direction the nose was pointing.

"It's pointing west," Onus said. "We've wasted all this time trying to find Fickle's nose when all we had to do was keep going in the direction we were going."

"But look," Twig said. "It's not the same direction we were going. It's pointing slightly higher than the route we were taking. It's slightly northwest from here."

"Neverwheat," Onus said.

"Neverwheat," Twig repeated.

The boys ran back to the broken man and gently lifted him off the ground. He felt lighter now than ever before. "We now know which direction to go," Onus said, "but we don't know how far it is."

"Let's hope it's just over that hill," Twig said. "Or else we're all in a lot of trouble."

And when Twig said, "trouble", he didn't mean the kind of trouble someone gets into when they throw a baseball through a basement window or when they spill raspberry juice on their mother's brand new white carpet. When Twig said, "trouble", he meant the type of trouble someone gets into when they stick a meatball that's too big to chew in their mouth and they get that meatball stuck in their esophagus and can no longer breath. That's the kind of trouble Twig meant when he said, "Or else we're all in a lot of trouble."

Trouble, like esophagus, is a funny word. But trouble isn't funny when it's happening to you. I once got in trouble at a diner when I mistook a woman for a man and asked, "Sir, could you please pass the ketchup."

The woman, who had more hair on her face than I did, said, "Sir, I am offended by your total disregard for other people's feelings. I am a woman and you are a fool."

The woman got up off her diner stool and left without finishing her meal. I felt horrible for had I taken an extra second or two to look at the woman I would have clearly seen that she was, in fact, a woman. And that's when the owner of the diner, a man named Two-Tooth Bill, walked over to me and asked me to leave. "You have offended one of my best customers and I simply cannot allow that," he said. "Please leave."

I was in trouble with Two-Tooth Bill and with the hairy woman all because I didn't think before I spoke. I never went back to Two-Tooth Bill's Diner, but if I did I would apologize for the trouble I caused. When someone is in trouble, apologizing is often the best way to fix it.

Apologizing wasn't going to fix the kind of trouble Onus and Twig were in. Only water and The Healing Sand would fix that type of trouble. One of the side effects of not drinking water for a long time is something called hallucination. This means you see things that aren't actually there. When someone begins to hallucinate, it usually means they are in very big trouble. As Twig slowly walked forward he began to see multicoloured spectrals of light dancing in front of him. Twig stopped walking.

"What's wrong?" Onus asked.

"Where did the lights come from?"

Onus looked past Twig and saw only hills and horizon. "What are you talking about Twig?"

"Look. They're all over the place."

"What are all over the place?" Onus asked.

"The lights. They're everywhere." Twig gently placed the broken man's legs on the ground and swatted at all the annoying lights. They buzzed around him, bouncing and jumping out of the way of Twig's swinging arms. And every time his hand went through one of the lights, it split in half

forming two separate lights. "There are too many of them, Onus. What are we going to do?"

"There's nothing in front of you, Twig." Onus said. Onus was worried. He had seen Twig act strange before, but not as strange as this. "Are you okay, Twig?"

"I can't see past them, Onus," Twig said. "I have to see past them so I can walk in the right direction."

Onus gently placed the rest of the broken man on the ground and ran over to where his friend was jumping high into the air chopping at invisible lights.

"You have to sit down," Onus said. "I think you're dehydrated and seeing things, because there are no lights in front of you."

"How can you say that, Onus? They're everywhere," Twig said.

"Please, Twig. Sit down and relax for a minute. There is nothing in front of you."

Twig stopped chopping at the air. There were so many lights he could barely see Onus through them. "I don't feel very well," he said and laid down on the rocky ground. Twig closed his eyes and grabbed his head with his hands. "They're even in here, Onus. They're even in my head. I can't get rid of them."

Onus looked back at the broken man who was lying motionless on the ground. He looked down at Twig who was again swatting at the air. Onus had been in tough situations before, but none of them had the same awful consequences this one had if he did the wrong thing. Twig needed water and the broken man needed The Healing Sand. The result of them not getting these things was death. Onus hated that word. He hated it more than asparagus and schooltime. The thing with death was it was irreversible. This means that once it happens one can never come back from it, unless they are a ghost, and even then, visitations are very rare.

Onus didn't want his friend or the strange broken man to die. He had already seen enough of that in his life. He closed his eyes tight and thought about his options.

"There is only one option," a voice screamed out. It was one of the old, chess-playing men. You see, when Onus went into deep thought, a group of men appeared in the back of his head. They were always gathered around a giant chessboard playing chess with giant chess pieces. The men would usually stop their game and all shout at Onus at the same time. Every once in a while one of the voices would be louder than all the others and that voice would have the answer Onus was looking for. But there was only one voice shouting at Onus this time. "There is only one option!"

Onus squeezed his eyes even tighter. The chessboard appeared and so did all the old men. All of them, except one, were passed out on the ground in Onus's head. This one old man was sitting up on the bench that was next to the chessboard. His head was wobbling back and forth.

"What's wrong with everyone," Onus thought.

The old man on the bench steadied his head and looked forward. "There is only one option or we all die," he said.

"What is it?" Onus said out loud.

"You must go yourself," the old man said.

Onus opened his eyes. He had known the answer all along; he had just been unwilling to accept it. He would have to leave Twig and the broken man if there was any chance of saving them. Onus got down on his knees and put his hand on Twig's shoulder.

"I'm going to find you some water and bring it back to you. You have to stay here and wait for me, okay?"

Twig stopped swatting the air. The coloured lights in front of him blinded him from everything else. It was a feeling he knew all too well. "You can't just leave me here, Onus."

"You need water and if you keep walking you're going to need it even worse. If you keep walking you could end up..."

"In the same place as Isis?" Twig said.

"Yes," Onus said. "In the same place as Isis."

Twig's head drooped forward. "As much as I'd like to be around Isis again, I don't think I want to be where she is. Please hurry back, Onus."

Onus remembered vowing to himself after the incident in Omniville, never to leave Twig again, but it was his only option. The old man in his head was right. "I'll go as fast as I can. Bye Twig."

"Bye Onus."

Onus let go of Twig's shoulder and ran. He didn't know where his energy was coming from. He needed water as much as Twig did, but somehow it wasn't affecting him the same way. He remembered a story his father had once told him about a woman who lifted up a bus to save her baby who had rolled under it. He said that when people are put in unimaginable situations they somehow find unimaginable powers to get them out of those situations. The woman knew the bus was crushing her baby. She never thought about how many thousands of pounds the bus weighed. She never thought about the type of tools it would usually take to lift a bus. All she thought about was getting the bus off her baby. And inside of her an unimaginable strength appeared. Onus's father called it a strength of the heart. It was the greatest strength of all. She put her two little hands on the bus's bumper and without hesitation she began to lift.

If it was a strength of the heart that was keeping Onus going then he hoped it would carry him all the way. But as the minutes passed and his pace slowed and still no Healing Sand appeared, he wondered if all the strength of the heart in the world would save them.

Onus made sure that he went straight. "Neverwheat," he said as he ran. "Neverwheat. Neverwheat. Neverwheat." And as his running turned into a slow walk he said, "Neverwheat." And when he fell to his knees and his slow walk turned into an even slower crawl, Onus still said, "Neverwheat."

He crawled up over a hill in-between two large trees and dropped to his stomach. Onus could move no more. "Neverwheat," he said one last time before closing his eyes. All the old men in his head were gone, dried up and blown away. All that remained were the giant chess pieces standing like lost soldiers awaiting their orders. And in the blackness of his throbbing head he heard something unusual, something that replaced the ever-present banter of the old men. But this sound wasn't coming from his head. It was coming from all around him. Onus used what was left of his strength of the heart to lift his head and open his eyes. Like a beautiful dream, a never-ending beach appeared in front of him.

"It must be a mirage," he whispered to himself. "I'm seeing things just like Twig did."

The beach was much different than the last beach Onus had been on. Firstly, there were no signs of giant worms anywhere. Secondly, the sand was so fine it looked like a khaki-coloured salt. Thirdly, there were people all over the beach. The people were tossing plastic discs and barbecuing over open flames. They were lying on towels, reading books and walking along the edge of the water licking ice-cream cones they held in their hands. It was an ice-cream cone licking person that noticed Onus first. The man dropped what looked like a mint chocolate chip ice-cream cone and ran up the beach toward Onus.

That's funny, Onus thought, mirages usually don't interact with the people who are imagining the mirage. Do they?

"My Goodness!" the man yelled as he ran. "My Goody Goodness!"

As he ran, he kicked up sand. The sand landed on sun-tanners' backs and in their hair. One woman yelled, "Hey! Do you know how hard it is to get sand out of long, beautiful hair like mine? Do you?"

The man looked behind him as he ran. "I'm sorry, miss," he said. "But there appears to be someone in dire need of help up there. Don't you see him?"

The woman with the sand in her hair saw Onus and jumped up off her towel. "My goodness!" she said. "There's a little boy up there."

Others on the beach were distracted by the commotion of the running man and the woman with the sand in her hair. They stopped throwing their plastic discs and they stopped reading their books. Suddenly, everyone on the beach was on their feet running toward Onus. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The first man who had noticed him arrived and knelt down. Then the woman with the sand in her hair arrived. And then, just like Twig's dancing lights, the people were all around him blocking his view of the sand and the water. A loud hum of chatter passed through the circle of people as they stared down at the nearly unconscious boy.

"My name is Evan," the man at Onus's side said. "You are very lucky, because I am a doctor. My specialty is fixing people up and you look like you're in need of fixing."

"Is this The Healing Sand?" Onus asked with what little strength he could muster.

Evan the doctor passed a strange look to the people who were circled around Onus, and their chatter suddenly came to a stop. He said, "I don't know anything about healing sand, little man. But like I said, I am a doctor and I'm pretty sure I can heal you up.

"I just need water, sir," Onus said.

"I'll be right back," the woman with the sand in her

hair said and pushed her way out through the circle of onlookers.

"There is a man behind me who is broken," Onus whispered. "He is the one who needs to be fixed."

The circle of people looked in the direction Onus spoke of. A murmur ran through the crowd. "I only see hills and trees," one person said. "The poor boy really must need water," another said. "He is hallucinating."

"Please," Onus said. "My friend is there, too, and he needs water. He needs it more than I do."

"Let's just get you fixed up first and then we'll go find your friend," Evan said.

The woman with the sand in her hair pushed her way back through the crowd of onlookers. A large bottle of water was in her hand. "Here we go," she said as she handed the bottle to Evan. Evan flipped Onus over and helped him into a sitting position. He handed Onus the bottle of water, but Onus could not even lift his arms to accept it. He had walked miles and miles carrying a broken man and then he had run several more. But he had so little strength left he could not even do an easy thing like lift his arms and take a bottle of water, which he desperately needed. "It's okay, little man," Evan said. "Just open your mouth."

Onus opened his mouth as wide as he could and bent his head back. Evan unscrewed the cap on the water bottle and poured water into Onus's open mouth. The water was like liquid strength. With a single touch to the tongue Onus could feel his energy return. And as he swallowed gulp after gulp, he was sure his dry insides were soaking up every last drop of it, because suddenly enough strength had returned that he could jump up off the ground. "I have to get this magic water to Twig," he yelled.

"I've heard of watering flowers and bushes," someone in the crowd said. "But I've never heard of watering twigs."

"If something is a twig," another person said, "usually it's too late to water it."

"It's not too late," Onus said and pushed through the people who had circled around him.

The circle of people turned their heads and watched as the strange little boy, who spoke of healing sand and watering twigs, ran in the direction he had said a broken man was lying. Even the doctor stood up and joined the crowd of onlookers. "He's had water and he still believes in the things he spoke of," he said. "Maybe there really are more people out there in need of help."

"We are not all doctors," someone in the crowd said. "We wouldn't know how to help."

"And I haven't finished the chapter I was reading in my mystery novel," another person said. "I was just about to find out who the murderer was."

Evan pushed through the crowd of people and turned back toward them. "I am a doctor and it is my duty to help those who are in need. That strange little boy says there are broken people out there and if I just ignore him I would be going against everything I was ever taught."

"If there are people out there," someone in the crowd said, "they will have to be fixed the traditional way, with medicine and bandages."

"Yes," another person said. "They cannot know we have The Sand."

"But they already know," Evan said.

"Everybody for a thousand miles knows," someone in the crowd said. "But it is just an urban legend to them, a ridiculous story with no basis in the truth."

"The Sand will not be revealed unless I think it is necessary," Evan said. With that, Evan turned and ran after Onus. The crowd of onlookers looked at Evan running away from them.

The woman with sand in her hair pushed her way out of the crowd and followed close behind Evan. "In good conscience," she said as she ran, "I cannot just stand by thinking someone may or may not be out there in need of help. Even if I'm not a doctor I can lift. Even if I am not a doctor I can say, 'Everything is going to be alright.'"

The onlookers looked around at each other and then, one by one, they moved out of their crowd formation and into a line. Quickly, the line of people in beach shorts and bathing suits were running after Onus, Evan the doctor and the woman with the sand in her hair.

What a difference a little water made. Onus felt like a new person filled with new strength and new confidence as he sprinted over grassy hills and across barren flatlands. He reached Twig and the broken man in a third of the amount of time it took him to reach the beach. But it was no longer just Twig and the broken man. An unexpected visitor had joined them and stood ominously over Twig's sprawled out body. Its shadow stretched along the ground for several feet reaching out toward the spot where Onus had come to an abrupt stop. The visitor's shadow touched the tip of Onus's shoe. He took a step back and the shadow slid off his shoe and back onto the dirty ground where it belonged. Onus heard chatter behind him. He turned and saw a long line of people in beach shorts and bathing suits running toward him. It was a comfort to know he didn't have to deal with the visitor himself.

"Oh, it's too late," someone yelled as the line of beachgoers got closer.

"It's still just standing there," someone else yelled. "That means they're still alive."

A man in beach shorts the colour of a melted rainbow ran past Onus. His arms spun around like sideways helicopter blades. "Shoo!" he yelled. "Shoo! Shoo!"

The visitor hopped back a few steps as the man with the swinging arms neared it. If it could speak, I am sure the visitor would have said something like, "This little boy is my dinner. I found him fair and square. Who do you think you are for trying to steal him from me?" But the visitor could only squawk, and humans don't have the ability to understand squawking. The visitor squawked and snapped its sharp beak at the man running toward it. It wasn't going to give up its dinner without a fight. The man did not stop, though. He ran right into the visitor sending it tumbling back. The visitor regained its balance and gave one last squawk before it spread its ragged wings and flew off.

Evan the doctor arrived at the scene. He bent over and coughed. "I haven't ran like that since I was a kid," he said.

"Neither have I," said the man with arms like helicopter blades.

Once Evan regained his breath he assessed the situation. "We know they're still alive or that vulture would have been eating them by now. But this is a whole lot worse than I imagined it would be."

The beachgoers reached the scene and circled around the sprawled out bodies just as they had circled around Onus at the beach. They congratulated the man who had scared away the vulture and then they chattered on about what they were looking at.

Evan flipped Twig onto his back and helped him into a sitting position just as he had done with Onus. But Twig's eyes remained closed and his head stayed flopped over to one side. "This boy is unconscious," Evan said to Onus. "He needs water right away, but he is unable to swallow it himself. We'll have to force it down his throat. What did you say your name was?"

"I don't think I ever said what my name is," Onus said.

"Well what's your name?" Evan asked.

"Onus," Onus said.

"Well isn't that the strangest name," someone in the crowd said.

"How can a parent name their child Onus?" another person said.

"Listen to me, Onus," Evan said. "If we're going to help your friend here, I need you to do me a favour. I need you to hold his mouth open for me. Use one of your hands to pull his nose up and use your other hand to pull his chin down. Can you do that?"

Onus nodded. "I can do that," he said and kneeled down beside Evan. Onus took a hold of Twig's heavy head and lifted it up so it was straight. He did as Evan asked and grabbed Twig's nose with one hand and Twig's chin with his other.

"Alright," Evan said. "Open it up and lets get this water down his throat."

Onus pried Twig's mouth open and Evan poured the remaining water from the bottle the woman with the sand in her hair had given him, into Twig's mouth. As he poured, he rubbed his hand up and down on Twig's throat. Onus didn't quite know what Evan was doing, but his experience with doctors reminded him that doctors do lots of strange things in order to fix their patients. Sometimes they stick Popsicle sticks in your throat and make you go, "Ahhh." Other times they take a rubber hammer and they bop you in the knee with it. Doctors are strange like that. Much of the water spilled out, but some of it made its way into Twig's stomach and just as it had done with Onus, the water brought Twig back to life. Onus let go of Twig as the last drop of water fell from the bottle. Twig began choking and spat water from his mouth and through his nose. His eyes opened and his eyelids fluttered. "The lights," Twig said through his choking. "They're gone."

The circle of people clapped and cheered. Onus joined them in their celebration.

"What's going on?" Twig asked as he looked around at all the unfamiliar faces.

"I did it, Twig," Onus said. "I found help."

"Did you find The Healing Sand?" Twig asked.

"No. But the man who poured the water down your throat is a doctor," Onus said.

"Can he fix the broken man?" Twig asked.

Evan the doctor was already next to the broken man. He had two fingers up against the broken man's neck and an ear against the broken man's mouth. "This man is still alive," Evan said. "But just barely. If he doesn't get to a hospital immediately, he's not going to make it."

"But the nearest hospital is five hours away," someone in the crowd said.

"Can't you do anything, Doc?" someone else in the crowd said.

Evan lightly pushed his finger into different spots on the broken man's body. "I have never in all my life seen a man more broken than this. I do not think there is a single bone in his body that is not broken."

The circle of people all began to speak at once. Every so often the boys could clearly hear a word or two or three escape from the jumbled chatter. "Blahbiddy blah dee dah The Healing Sand. Doo eee wahh sand shee diddy bah The Healing Sand. Ahh veee sooo wah healing ashy hoowah The Healing Sand." It reminded Onus of the old, chess playing men in his head. He closed his eyes tight to see if they had returned, but all that was there was the giant chessboard. For years the old men had helped Onus make decisions and get out of tough situations. Onus did not want to think about how he would cope if the old men never returned, so he opened his eyes up wide. "The doctor said he didn't

know about The Healing Sand, but I keep hearing it in your talking," Onus said to the circle of people gathered around him. "Do any of you know where it is? It is the only thing that will save the broken man now."

The circle of people looked at one another and shook their heads and said things like, "I don't know anything about healing sand, do you?" and "Well, I've never heard of such a thing."

"All right, that's enough," Evan the doctor said as he looked up at the crowd. "We can't pretend any longer. The boy is right. This man will die if we don't get him to a hospital quick." Evan stood up and spoke to the crowd directly. "The only thing that will save him is The Sand."

"But he is a stranger," someone in the crowd said. "He is not our problem."

The woman with the sand in her hair stepped out of the circle of people and stood next to Evan. "But he is also a human being like you and me. We may not know him, but someone else does," she said, "and if he dies, they are going to miss him dearly."

Another man stepped out of the circle and said, "She is right. In good conscience, we cannot let this man die if we know there is something that can fix him. But once he is fixed, we must make him swear never to tell about The Sand."

The circle of people seemed to regard the man as a person of authority, because they began to nod their heads and say things like, "If Louis thinks we should help, then I guess it isn't such a bad thing" and "We would be bad people if we didn't help."

"But what about the children?" someone behind the circle of people asked.

The man looked down at the children. "Well," he said, "they must swear never to tell about The Sand, too. Can the two of you keep a secret?"

Onus and Twig nodded their heads at the same time. A tone in the man's voice implied that if Onus and Twig couldn't keep a secret there would be trouble, and as we all know, trouble is something nobody likes to get into.

"Good," the man said. "Now let's get this broken man to The Healing Sand."

The circle of people moved in tight around the broken man and as a group they hoisted his limp body over their heads. There is a funny word that comes to my mind when I picture this group of people carrying the broken man over their heads. The word is portage. If you have not heard of this word, it is probably because you are not someone who spends a lot of time on the water rowing boats or in a classroom studying history. People in canoes are often seen portaging. You can tell this because the canoe is not in the water, but hoisted high up over their heads, being carried from one waterway to the next. I know the broken man was not a canoe, but he was definitely being carried like one, and the people carrying him definitely looked like they were portaging as they followed Evan the doctor back in the direction from which they had come.

Onus and Twig stumbled along quietly a short distance behind the group. It was a good feeling to know the group of people had decided to take the broken man to The Healing Sand, but the debate, which had preceded their decision left a real sense of unease in the pit of each boy's stomach. When the man who made them promise never to tell about The Healing Sand took his hand off the broken man and jogged back toward them, that sense of unease sprouted roots, which quickly grew into their legs and their arms and even managed to tickle their brains.

"If the world were to find out about The Healing Sand, our little community would be destroyed," the man said as he began to walk alongside Onus and Twig. "People would

crowd into our little town and leave garbage on the streets and trample our gardens. They would eat all the food in our little grocery store and park their cars in spots designated for emergency vehicles only. We do not want this. We have spent our lives trying to avoid this and we're not going to let a stranger with broken bones and a couple of little kids ruin it for us. Do you understand?"

Onus and Twig did not look at the man as he spoke to them. He was large and very imposing, like a teetering glass cabinet filled with expensive glass figurines. And if you can imagine a teetering glass cabinet filled with expensive glass figurines you can also imagine the sounds such a thing would make. They are horribly imposing sounds, just like the sounds coming from the man's mouth.

"I will take your silence as a 'Yes'," the man said. "But before I return to the group I want to tell you a quick story about a person who came looking for The Sand and found it. This person's name was Dmitri and he had a broken heart. You see, his longtime love, Bernice, had left him for another man. Dmitri thought Bernice was the one he was going to marry and grow old with. When Dmitri asked Bernice for her hand in marriage, she said no. She said another man named David had asked her to marry him, and to this David she had said yes. Upon receiving this information, Dmitri felt his heart break in two. For those of us who have experienced a broken heart, we know that the only way to fix such an ailment is time. But Dmitri believed no amount of time was going to fix his broken heart. The wound was too deep. His heart was forever damaged. He needed something stronger than time to get over Bernice's attack. He needed The Healing Sand. Yes, The Healing Sand has been a legend around the world for as long as we have been hiding it and our little town has always been synonymous with this legend. We are unsure how this came to be, but it

has brought many people here over the years. These people have always left disappointed and even more broken than when they arrived. Dmitri was determined not to be one of these people. He bought a tent in our department store and he pitched it in the center of town. For eight days he wandered the streets asking people if they knew where The Sand was. For eight days he searched every nook and every cranny of our little town to no avail. And on the ninth day when he decided to call it quits and give in to a life with a broken heart, he saw one of our residents walk past him. Now I know the sight of a person walking isn't anything special and most times you wouldn't even notice a person walking past you. But this person, who shall remain nameless, had a peculiar disposition about them. What I mean is, their right arm was broken and turned the wrong way. This person was trying to act normal knowing that Dmitri was in town, but acting normal with a broken arm is a hard thing to do, especially if the bone inside that arm is sticking out of the skin and blood is trickling to the ground leaving a trail behind you. Dmitri noticed this person immediately and at a safe distance he followed the trail of blood all the way to The Healing Sand. Dmitri's broken heart was fixed, but the location of The Sand was compromised, so we had to make a tough decision. If Dmitri were to get back to his little town and say that he had found The Healing Sand that previously only existed in legend, our town would be doomed. We decided to break Dmitri for good. People have come looking for Dmitri since, but like The Sand, they have been unable to find him. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

The boys could feel the man's gaze penetrating the tops of their heads. He wanted an answer. "Sir," Onus said, still afraid to look up at him. "I think you're trying to say that if we don't keep your secret we'll end up broken for good."

"I'm glad you understand," the man said and patted Onus on the head. "Now let's get back to fixing your friend up, shall we?"

FIVE

A shiny bronze sign on the door said "Dr. Evan S. Ant." The group of beachgoers, who were portaging the broken man, pushed through the door and laid him out on a leathery bed that had a long, thin piece of white paper lying overtop of it. The paper crinkled as the broken man settled onto it.

"I don't see any sand in here," Twig said after he entered the office.

Onus looked around the office. The wall was covered in posters of people missing their skin. One showed a heart and all the little valves and doohickeys that make it work. Another showed all the muscles found in the human body. "Did you know your tongue is a muscle," Onus said.

"Onus, I didn't ask you about my tongue," Twig said. "I said I don't see any sand in here. Do you?"

The group of beachgoers shuffled out of the room and closed the door behind them leaving only the boys, the doctor and the broken man. The office appeared much larger without all the beachgoers in it. There was a little desk with a computer and a phone on it in one corner. On the wall behind the desk was a framed document with the doctor's name on it and a whole bunch of other stuff Onus couldn't read. Next to the leathery bed, on which the broken man had been placed, was a little sink and counter. Jars filled

with cotton balls and Popsicle sticks and rubbery tubes sat on the counter.

Evan was leaning over the broken man with his ear above the man's mouth. "He's still alive, but just by a hair."

"Sir," Twig said. "I thought the people were carrying him to some sand."

Evan stood up straight and said, "I have never before put something this broken into The Sand. I wanted to bring him here first so I can properly prepare him."

"Why did you say 'something'?" Onus asked. "Isn't the sand for healing people?"

Evan opened a cupboard below the sink and pulled out a ball of gauze the size of a cantaloupe. He found the end of the gauze and unlatched the safety pin that was holding it all together. "Whether it is a broken arm or a broken promise, a broken alarm clock or a broken heart," Evan said as he unraveled the ball of gauze, "The Healing Sand will fix it. That is why it is so important its location is never discovered."

"How can sand fix things?" Twig asked. "Are there mechanics and doctors and clockmakers hiding inside of it?"

Evan laughed as he lifted the broken man's right foot and began wrapping it in the gauze. "If only it was that simple, my little friend," he said. "There are many stories about how The Sand gained its magical power, but the one that people around here seem to believe the most is the one about the witches."

"Witches," Twig exclaimed. "Witches are bad. How can someone who is bad create something that does so much good?"

Evan lifted the broken man's left foot and began wrapping it in gauze. "A long long time ago, before television and rollerskates," he said, "something horrible happened in many of the little communities around our country. People

began accusing women who possessed unique abilities or odd habits of being witches. Like you, these people believed witches were very bad. They believed witches stole children, which they dried out, ground up and used as ingredients in their potions. They also believed witches' spells caused the bad weather that lead to the failure of their crops, which lead to an inability to feed their families. So they rounded up all of these women and they burned them at the stake. As horrible as that sounds, what's even worse is the majority of the women burned weren't even witches."

Evan rolled the broken man on his side and carefully wrapped the gauze around the man's waist. "Three of these women who were accused of being witches fled from their homes and ended up here in our little community," he said. "Through an underground network of whispers and coded notes, created by women in similar situations, these three women found out our community was one of the few in the country that wasn't persecuting witches. In fact, the majority of people in our community didn't even believe in witches. These three women ended up on the doorstep of a woman named Felicia Ant, the town doctor and my great great grandmother. Felicia fed them and kept a roof over their heads and hid them for five long years until the witchhunts came to an end. And in those five years my great great grandmother never once saw these women flying on brooms, or casting spells, or throwing newts' tails into giant cauldrons. They were normal women, like her. On the day the women were set to return to their families and their homes, they asked that our entire community join them down at the beach. Many journals and diaries unearthed since then have alluded to this event. Everyone was there. The women looked at all the honest and caring faces and said, 'To you, who have been so kind to us these past five years, we wish you a life unbroken by sickness or injury. To you we offer our thanks.'"

Evan placed the broken man on his back again and gently lifted the man's right arm. As he began wrapping the arm in gauze, Onus noticed the broken man was beginning to look like a mummy. "Each of these women was carrying a sash," Evan said. "These sashes were filled with powder the same colour as the sand. They emptied their sashes overtop an area of the beach about the size of a parking spot and they requested a man with a broken leg join them next to the sand. The man reluctantly hobbled forward. 'Now walk through the sand,' one of the witches said. The man with the broken leg stepped onto the area of sand the women had poured the powder on. He quickly sank down to his waist. He took another step forward and sank to his head. To most people, sinking in sand would be a frightening experience, but the man with the broken leg kept moving forward. He took another step and he was completely submerged in the sand. The crowd of onlookers gasped in either amazement or horror and then they waited."

Evan finished wrapping the broken man's right arm and moved over to the man's left arm. Gently, he picked it up and began wrapping it in gauze. Onus and Twig's eyes were wide open in anticipation of what happened next in the Evan's story.

"A minute later," Evan finally said, "the man leapt out of the sand and began running around the crowd of onlookers. As he ran he yelled, 'It's fixed! I can't believe it, my leg is fixed!' In all the commotion and excitement, the crowd didn't notice the three women had disappeared. The Healing Sand and the myth behind it were born. From that day forward, our community has kept it hidden from the world."

"We could have used The Sand when my eyesight was broken," Twig said. "It would have saved us from ever meeting that horrible Fang."

Onus wasn't listening to Twig, because he was thinking of something else. He was thinking of his twin sister Isis. There is nothing more broken than a person who has turned purple. If Isis went through The Sand, he wondered, would she be fixed? "Does The Sand fix people who are...who are dead?" Onus said. He hated the word 'dead' even more than he hated the word 'death,' because 'dead' was final. No coming back. Finito. Dead was a term used for a battery drained of all its power...not for the twin sister who still spoke to him when he really needed to hear her voice.

Evan put down the broken man's left arm and gently lifted the man's head. He began wrapping the gauze around it. "Someone who is dead is beyond repair," Evan said. "One of our residents tried to put his recently deceased mother into The Sand and she never came out. It was like The Sand swallowed her up. We sent people in to find her, but that was a mistake, too. If someone who is perfectly healthy goes into The Sand, they come out...well, they come out weird."

Evan lowered the broken man's wrapped head down onto the bed. Except for a small opening around the eyes and an even smaller opening around the mouth, the broken man was wrapped head to toe in gauze. He looked exactly like a mummy now. Evan could see the look of confusion on the boys' faces. "He cannot walk for himself," Evan said. "So we have to drag him through the sand using a rope. This ensures that we do not injure him even more than he already is."

As confusing as it was to see Evan turn the broken man into a mummy, it wasn't what was confusing the boys the most. "When you say that the perfectly healthy people who go into the sand come out weird...what do you mean by weird?" Onus asked.

"There is an old saying," Evan said. "'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' The Sand seems to be a great believer in this old saying. You see, if something already working at its full

capacity goes into The Sand, The Sand seems to get confused and starts rearranging things that never needed rearranging in the first place. It creates problems where problems did not exist. The three women gave us a wonderful tool to fix the things in our lives that need fixing, but improper use of this tool, as with improper use of most tools, can lead to horrible results."

"What...what happens to the weird people?" Twig asked. "I mean, can't they just go back into the sand and get fixed?"

Evan glanced around his office. "We're wasting time talking," he said. "We have to get this man to The Sand now. Over there, on the floor behind my desk, is a dolly. Can one of you boys grab it and wheel it over here."

"What good is a dolly going to do us?" Twig said. "Dollies are for babies and girls. We're neither of those."

"No Twig," Onus said. "A dolly is also something movers use to move heavy loads, like tvs and fishtanks. It has wheels on it. I remember when Clay moved in next door to me. The movers used a dolly to bring in all sorts of things."

"Not just movers use dollies," Evan said. "Anyone with something heavy to move can use a dolly. This man is far too heavy for the three of us to move by ourselves, so we'll have to use a dolly."

Onus and Twig both knew the broken man wasn't as heavy as Evan assumed, because they had both carried him such a far distance, but they also knew that their trek would have been a whole lot easier if only they had had a dolly.

"I'll get the dolly," Onus said. Behind the desk was a device quite different from the one Onus had seen the movers using when Clay had moved in next door. It was a long, flat sheet of metal with two wheels attached to one end and two handles attached to the other end. Attached to the sheet of metal were three straps. When Onus picked

up the dolly and rolled it back toward Evan, the long straps dragged along the floor.

A funny thing happens to people when they are put in a situation where several different things are going on at one time. These people often get distracted and forget about what they were originally doing. I am sure the first thing you thought when the boys entered Evan's office was, Aha, there's a phone. They can call home and their parents can come and pick them up and their whole journey will be over. It was the first thing I thought when I first heard the story. But you see, we're just doing one thing at this time. We're reading this book. Because of this, we can remember what Onus and Twig were originally doing. We remember that they were riding Gromley the Mox, trying to get home. But what if someone suddenly starts knocking on your front door and they're yelling, "I know you're in there. Answer me!" You're going to get distracted. You're going to want to see why someone wants you to answer the door so badly. You might put your book down and answer the door. For the next fifteen minutes you might try explaining to the angry postman at the door that he has the wrong house and that you are not Mr. Jeffers who left his collection of poisonous spiders in the mailbox. After the angry postman apologizes for the mix-up and your heart is still racing from the fear of being attacked by an angry postman, you might forget about what you were originally doing. I know I would. Onus and Twig were not distracted by an angry postman, but by a broken man, The Healing Sand, Evan the doctor, the witches and dollies. Suddenly, the importance of getting home diminished. Or maybe it didn't diminish, it just slipped their minds because so many other things were going on at the same time. Onus did not notice the phone on Evan's desk, for if he had, and he had phoned home, he and Twig may have been able to avoid everything that happened next.

"What happens next?" Onus asked.

"What happens next," Evan repeated, but not in a question form, "is the three of us are going to stand this man up and strap him to the dolly. I want you, Onus, to grab his right arm and I want you, Twig, to grab his left arm. I will grab him around the waist and on the count of three we will lift him up off this table."

Twig chuckled.

"Is there something funny about what we're going to do next?" Evan asked.

"No, sir," Twig said. "It's funny that you call that thing the broken man is lying on a table. Tables are for eating at or doing homework at. Tables aren't for laying sick and broken people on."

"If someone needs to be fixed up," Evan said, "a person can lie on almost anything. Tables. Beds. The hoods of cars. As long as a doctor can reach that person, it really doesn't matter where they are. Now let's lift this man."

The boys each grabbed one of the broken man's arms and waited for Evan's count.

Evan wrapped his arms around the broken man's waist and counted, "One. Two..."

On three, the boys used all of their strength to lift. The broken man was much heavier than he had been before. Twig couldn't believe a ball of gauze could make so much difference to the weight of a man. Onus couldn't believe he was lifting a real-life mummy.

They carried the broken man, who was now a mummy, to the dolly and laid him down on the flat back of it. Evan pulled each strap tight around the broken man and stood the dolly up so the broken man looked like he was standing.

"All right, boys," Evan said. "It's off to The Healing Sand."

Evan opened a drawer beside the sink (that was next to the table/bed the broken man had been lying on) and he pulled out a pair of sunglasses and a rope. "Which one of you boys wants to carry this?" he asked, referring to the rope and not the sunglasses.

"I'll carry it," Onus said and took the rope from Evan's outstretched arm.

Evan slid the sunglasses on over his eyes and he rolled the dolly out of his office. The boys followed close behind him as he walked down the hall to the front entrance of the office building. Evan spun the dolly around and pushed through the entrance with his back. The mummy, who once was the broken man if you have forgotten, towered over the boys. His eyes were open and wide. He looked confused and frightened, which is an odd way for a mummy to look. Usually it is the people looking at mummies who look confused and frightened. "It's okay," Onus said in a comforting voice. "We're going to fix you."

When the boys had come into the office, behind the group of broken-man portaging beachgoers, they hadn't noticed that a sandy beach was right across the street. It was toward this sandy beach that Evan pushed the dolly. The closer they got to the sand, the less they could see. The sand twinkled like it was filled with billions of stars. The twinkling light was so bright the boys had to look away from it. "Even before the witches made our sand special, our sand was special," The boys heard Evan say from in front of them. He obviously sensed their discomfort. "A common mineral found in the majority of sand on Earth is quartz. Quartz is made up of an element called silica, which is also found in glass. As you know, when sun reflects off of glass, especially broken glass, twinkling sometimes occurs. The sand across from my office has an unusually high amount of quartz in it. So when the sun is shining, as it is right now, the sand becomes very hard

to look at. My advice, and as a doctor I am allowed to give advice, is that next time you come to this part of the beach, you bring some sunglasses with you."

"Why wouldn't he have offered us sunglasses if he knew the sand was so bright?" Twig whispered to Onus.

"Maybe he only had the one pair," Onus said.

"Well, it still wasn't very nice of him to not think about us," Twig said.

"He saved our lives, Twig," Onus said. "He's about to save the life of the broken man, too. I think he has already done enough for us, don't you think?"

Evan rolled the dolly onto the twinkling sand and stopped. When the boys caught up to him he pointed toward a large rock that was down the beach. "The rock over there is the marker set up by the townsfolk of two generations past," he said. Of course, the sand was too bright and all the boys could see was fiery white.

"Sir," Twig said. "We cannot see a thing."

"There is an easy way to fix that," Evan said. "And you won't need any medications or Healing Sand. Simply look up and follow the sound of my song."

Evan began whistling a song Onus knew all too well. It was the song he and Isis would sing when they would sit at the kitchen table and make toothpick houses. As Evan whistled, Onus could almost hear Isis singing along with him. "Ogres, they spit. Ogres, they spit. Carry an umbrella or you might just get hit. Ogres, they stink. Ogres, they stink. Keep your nose plugged because it's worse than you think. Ogres are rude and Ogres are vile. They don't even care how you feel. Stay away from an ogre at least for a while or you might end up as a meal."

The memory of Isis was sad, because it made Onus yearn for a return to those days, but it didn't stop Onus from smiling. He had almost forgotten about those good times

and it was Evan's whistling that had made him remember again. When a person is gone, whether it is to the place people go when they turn purple, or it is to the laundromat, the only thing we are left with is our memories of them. Memories keep these missing people with us always. When the memories disappear, so too do the people. Onus swore he would never let any of the memories of Isis disappear. He looked up and listened as the sound of Evan's whistling got more faint. He was moving away from them fast.

"Why aren't we following his whistling?" Twig asked.

"I'm sorry, Twig," Onus said. "I was just remembering something Isis and I used to do on rainy Saturday afternoons when we couldn't go outside."

"I don't want to sound rude, but if we don't start walking now, his whistling is going to disappear and we'll never be able to find him or The Sand," Twig said.

"Can you see me when you're looking up?" Onus asked.

"A little bit," Twig responded.

"Follow me then and we won't get separated," Onus said and ran in the direction of Evan's whistling.

Twig kept close behind Onus. He could hear the crunching of sand under Onus's heavy footsteps. All he could see in front of him was nothing, because he was looking straight up. Have you ever tried running while looking straight up? It is not a smart thing to do even if you are on an empty beach. Twig, and I'm quite sure Onus, as well, worried about tripping over something or running into something. Evan had pointed at a rock neither boy could see. The last thing either of them wanted to do was to trip over the rock and waste even more time dealing with their injuries.

Onus did not trip over a rock, but he ran straight into Evan's back and Twig ran straight into Onus's back. The force of the impact caused both boys to say, "Ooomph!" as all the air was quickly forced out of their lungs.

"Careful boys," Evan said as he came to a sudden stop and turned to look down on the boys. His sunglasses reflected the sparkling sand. "You almost made me lose my grip on the dolly. I'd feel bad if this man fell and suffered even a tiny bit more."

"We're sorry, sir," Onus said. "Are we almost there?"

"Did you notice the number painted on the rock we just passed?" Evan asked

"I didn't notice anything," Twig said. "All I can see is that bird flying over us and those clouds over there. If I look down, I'm afraid my eyeballs will burn up right inside their sockets."

"Well that's a funny thing to be afraid of," Evan said. "Because it is almost impossible to burn up your eyeballs unless you have a blow torch or you're thrown into a fire."

"I didn't mean it that way," Twig explained. "It was a... my dad calls it a figure of speech. All I meant was that the sand is so bright that I feel like that is what would happen if I look at it."

"Yes, of course," Evan said. "I knew it was a figure of speech. I am a doctor and doctors know things like that."

"What about the number on the rock?" Onus asked.

"Twenty-two," Evan said. "About fifty years ago one of the townsfolk painted the number on the rock to signify how many steps it was to The Healing Sand. The thing with sand is it all looks the same. In order to keep The Healing Sand hidden, we were unable to add anything to it, like pepper or food colouring. If we take exactly twenty-two steps from the marker we will not pass The Healing Sand and we will not step into it. It is a perfect map."

"But how do you know which direction to go?" Onus asked.

"There is another marker for that," Evan said, "but I had to promise everyone in town I would not share that information

with you. Let's just say we're heading in the right direction now. Luckily, I still remember how many steps I had taken from the rock before you two bumped into me."

Evan turned around and continued walking forward. Under his breath he counted, "twelve...thirteen...fourteen...fifteen..."

"...sixteen," the boys said quietly as they followed along behind Evan. "...seventeen...eighteen...nineteen...twenty...twenty-one...twenty-two."

"And stop," Evan said and removed his sunglasses. He turned around and looked down at the two boys. "I give you, The Healing Sand."

"I wish I could see it," Onus said.

"I wish I could see it, too," Twig said. "How can you look at it without your sunglasses?"

"The sun is starting to set, boys," Evan said. "It is past the point where it reflects off the sand. You can look down now."

"Oh, that's good," Twig said. "My neck is really starting to ache."

Twig looked down first and was confused. "I thought you said we were at The Healing Sand?" he asked.

"We are," Evan said. "It's right in front of you."

Onus looked down at the sand Evan spoke of and he, too, was unimpressed. "It doesn't look any different from any other part of the beach."

"It's exactly the same as the rest of the beach," Twig said, which was essentially the same thing Onus had said.

"What were you expecting?" Evan asked.

The boys shrugged their shoulders at the same time. They hadn't known what to expect. Everybody had made such a big deal about The Healing Sand; they thought it had to be a little different than the rest of the sand on the beach.

"It fixes anything that is broken," Evan said. "Isn't that extraordinary enough for you?"

"I guess so," Onus said.

"I guess so," Twig said.

"I don't have time to stand here and talk about the shortcomings of The Healing Sand with a couple of kids I barely know," Evan said. "This man has to go through it now or he IS going to die."

Evan unlatched the three straps wrapped around the broken man. "Help me out here, boys," he said. Onus dropped the rope he was carrying and he and Twig each grabbed one of the broken man's wrapped arms. The three of them gently lifted him off the dolly and laid him on the sand.

Evan took the rope and tied it around the broken man's legs. He then tossed the other end across the area of sand he had said was The Healing Sand. "Alright, boys," he said. "We only have a couple of seconds here, so follow me quickly."

Evan lead them in a half circle around what could only have been the edge of The Healing Sand. "Quickly boys," he shouted. "We can't lose the rope."

Onus looked at the rope that was lying across the sand like a sleeping snake. Suddenly, it shifted. "The rope," Onus said. "It just moved."

"I'll get it," Evan said as he jumped over The Healing Sand and landed next to the end of the rope. He grabbed the rope and pulled it up above the sand. "One more second and the sand would have sucked it under."

"Just like the beach outside of Omniville," Twig whispered to Onus. "Maybe it isn't a witch's spell that makes the sand do that. Maybe it's giant worms."

"I'm sure giant worms wouldn't fix anything," Onus whispered back. "I'm sure they'd just eat everything that went into the sand."

"Pay attention, boys," Evan said. "I need you to help me here because I've never done anything like this before. Have you ever played Tug-o-War?"

"Every school sports day," Twig answered.

"Good," Evan said. "This will kind of be like Tug-o-War. We're all going to grab a part of the rope and on my word we're going to pull on it. Got it?"

"But if it was like Tug-o-War," Twig said, "there would be someone on the other end pulling the rope against us."

"There simply is not enough time here to discuss the intricacies of Tug-o-War," Evan said. "Grab the rope and pull it now."

The boys grabbed the rope and together with Evan they pulled. Slowly, the broken man began to move through the sand. But dragging a wrapped up broken man through sand was a lot more difficult than any of them thought it would be. "Keep on pulling boys!" Evan yelled. They huffed and they pulled. They puffed and they pulled. And when they eventually got the broken man's entire body on to The Healing Sand, Evan said, "Stop."

"Stop?" Twig repeated, not as a command, but as a question.

"The Sand has to take a hold of him," Evan said. "It should only be a couple of seconds, but be ready. If you thought it was difficult pulling him before, you're in for a big surprise."

"I only like surprises if they involve candy and toys," Twig said.

"Then this surprise might disappoint you," Evan said.

"Look! Look!" Onus shouted. "He's sinking."

First, the broken man's head dipped under the sand, and then his shoulders went under, and then his stomach and waist disappeared. "Keep your hands on the rope," Evan said. "As soon as his feet go under we have to pull."

All three of them watched intently as the sand filled in overtop of what remained of the sinking broken man.

"He's going," Onus said.

"He's gone," Twig said.

"Pull!" Evan yelled.

The three of them dug their feet into the sand and tightened their grips around the rope and pulled. They heaved and they hoed. They fought and they struggled. Evan had been correct. Pulling the broken man out of the sand once he had sunk was ten times...no, a hundred times more difficult than it had been before. It definitely felt like a game of Tug-o-War now, except one side was far more weighted than the other. "It feels like it's the three of us against the rest of the school!" Twig shouted. "That's not a very fair match up."

"You see...Arrrrg," Evan said between a heave. "The man is still wrapped up and unable to move...Arrrg. The sand thinks he is still broken...Arrrg. It's fighting to keep him until it knows he is fixed...Arrrg...until it feels him moving around...Arrrg. We have to pull harder or The Sand will overfix him...Arrrg."

Onus closed his eyes and imagined he had superhero strength. He saw himself standing on the chessboard in his head. He saw his arm muscles growing, tearing the sleeves of the shirt he was wearing. He saw a large boulder next to the empty bench a couple of the old men used to sit on. He walked over to it and picked it up like it was an oversized basketball. With strength like that, he was sure he could do anything.

Twig closed his eyes and saw his mother looking out the front window of their house. Tears were falling from her eyes. He knew she was crying because she didn't know where her son was. He knew the faster he got the broken man out of the sand the faster he could get home and tell his mother he was okay. With motivation like that, he was sure he could do anything.

The boys pulled so hard it felt like their arms were going to rip right off of their bodies. And what a horrible thing

to happen that would be. Once an arm is removed from a body, the likelihood of ever getting it to work again is very slim. They would have to get Evan to stitch their arms back on and hope all those nerves and veins would connect up again, or even worse, they'd have to find Fang and hope his new obsession was arms so they could trade him their arms for some finely carved wooden ones.

"Great work...Arrrg," Evan said, "He's coming!"

The boys opened their eyes and saw the white of the gauze, which was wrapped around the broken man's feet, appear in the sand. Like a submarine surfacing, the man's feet and legs raised up out of the sand. The rest of his body soon followed. The broken man was wriggling and squirming. To Onus, he looked like an oversized (but not jumbo jet sized), confused worm.

"A couple more tugs, boys," Evan said, and with one final heave the broken man was out of The Healing Sand and squirming at their feet below them.

"Mrots mrowing on ere?" the broken man, who probably wasn't broken anymore, said. "Mry ant I mrove?"

Evan dropped the rope and kneeled down next to the man. "Just relax there, partner," Evan said. "Before you can move, or talk properly I'll have to unwrap you."

"Oo are oo?" the man said.

"My name is Evan Steven Ant and I am a doctor," Evan said as he began unwrapping the gauze from around the man's head. "These boys brought you to me so I could fix you."

"E Ealing And," the man said. "It does exist."

"But you can never tell," Onus said.

"You can never tell anyone," Twig said. "Or you'll be broken so bad not even The Sand will be able to fix you."

The man lying on the sand turned his head and looked up at the two boys who had rescued him. "I remember you,"

he said. "The two of you were on your way home. You...your name is Twig. And...and I never caught your name."

"My name is Onus," Onus said.

Evan grabbed a hold of the man's arm and pulled him up off the sand so the man was standing. He took a hold of a dangling piece of gauze and he unwrapped the rest of the man's body.

"Onus and Twig," the man said and shook his arms like he was beating a drum. "I cannot believe my broken bones are fixed. My name is Ignatious and I am forever in your debt. To repay you with a thank you would be inconsiderate and inconceivable. The two of you put your life in danger to save mine. Me...a perfect stranger. I owe you everything. I promise, if there is anything you ever need of me, I will be there for the two of you to do it."

"That is very kind of you, sir," Onus said.

"We just want to go home," Twig said.

"Then home is where I will take you," Ignatious said.

"But first," Evan said. "I need to know how you broke so many bones. In all my career I have never seen anyone as broken as you."

Ignatious brushed some sand off his elbows and shook his pant legs. When he looked back at Evan there was a pool of water under each of his eyes. "I fell off of my horse," he said quietly.

"That's odd," Evan said. "I have fixed many people who have fallen off of their horses. They had broken arms and legs, but never had they broken their entire body. Unless you fell off your horse while he was running as fast as a train, I cannot understand how your condition came to be."

"He was...Casper and I got spooked," Ignatious said. "I made Casper run faster than he had ever run before. I didn't want...I didn't want..."

Ignatious stopped and appeared to be trapped in the

memory that was now playing in his head. It was a memory you and I know, because we both read about it earlier. It was the memory of the giant worms lifting their slimy heads up off the ground. It was a memory many of us would try to forget, like the memory of the time we dove off the high diving board in gym class and our swimsuit fell off, or the memory of being trapped in a hole with the possibility of never getting out. But like most bad memories, as hard as we may try, forgetting such things is next to impossible.

"You didn't want what?" Evan asked.

"I didn't want to get eaten," Ignatious said.

"Eaten by what?" Evan asked.

"By the giant worms."

Onus and Twig gasped. Could Ignatious be talking about the same giant worms that almost ate them? How many giant worms could there possibly be out there?

"We ran so fast," Ignatious said, "and we weren't paying attention to anything around us and Casper stepped into a mole hole and I was thrown. That's all I remember until these two boys found me."

"I'm sorry," Evan said. "Did you say you didn't want to get eaten by giant worms?"

"Yes," Ignatious said quietly. "They were the size of jet airplanes."

"That seems a little hard to believe," Evan said.

"No harder to believe than sand that fixes broken bones," Onus said. Evan and Ignatious looked down at Onus. "The worms are real," he said. "We've seen them, too."

"I thought they were going to turn us into fertilizer," Twig said.

"Well, my medical recommendation would be to steer clear of these so-called giant worms from now on," Evan said. "Not even The Healing Sand could fix the type of damage something like that could cause."

"I don't need a doctor to tell me what's already common sense," Ignatious said. "I hope to never come across those things again."

Twig didn't want to think about the worms anymore. They were a horrible memory he was sure would live on in his head for years to come. He stopped listening to Evan and Ignatious and he looked out at the water. What he saw was unlike anything he had ever seen before. A giant's hand had taken a giant paintbrush and with a few strokes had altered the appearance of the world without any of them noticing it. Twig tapped Onus on the shoulder and pointed out toward the horizon line that ran along the water. The sun was setting and the once blue sky was now fire orange and pink. It was a sunset unlike any either of them had ever seen.

Evan and Ignatious noticed the boys and joined them in their viewing of the sunset. "It's marvelous, isn't it?" Evan said.

"I have never in my life seen a sunset like this," Ignatious said.

"I get to see this every night," Evan said.

"I'm right to think I'd be a much happier son-of-a-gun if I could see this every night," Ignatious said.

"Please," Twig said. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, because my dad always told me to respect people who are older than me, but can we just watch the sunset in silence?"

Onus smiled, because he was thinking the same thing.

The two men opened their mouths to speak, but held back whatever words they were about to say. At the same time they smiled, too. They both knew Onus and Twig had gone through a lot over the past few days and witnessing something as beautiful as a sunset was probably the best medicine for them when it came to strengthening their spirit. Evan and Ignatious, and Onus and Twig looked out at the

sunset in silence. The oranges in the sky faded and the pinks got more intense and as the minutes passed, a dark purple slowly seeped into the pink. Suddenly, the sky completely changed again.

Streetlights popped on behind them and shadows and silhouettes crawled out from the spaces in which they had spent the day hiding. At the far end of the beach two such silhouettes were walking toward the four people staring out at the final few moments before day became night. "I only speak now because the sun is gone," Evan said, breaking the long, introspective silence. "The three of you have had a long few days and are probably in need of a hot meal and a good night's sleep. It would be my pleasure to offer you these things this evening and when you wake in the morning you can continue forth on your journey. I insist."

Onus, Twig and Ignatious were grateful for Evan's offer. A sunset may help heal a person's spirit, but food and sleep heal a person's tired and hungry body. Which is more important is hard to say. To a couple of kid's who have regained a little of their hope, perhaps food and sleep is more important, but to a man stuck at the bottom of a hole who has lost all hope he might ever see his home again, a healthy spirit is the most important thing in the world.

"Sounds good," Ignatious said. "And in the morning I will make good on my promise and do whatever it takes to get the two of you home."

The silhouettes walking along the beach got closer and remained unnoticed. Had Onus and Twig noticed the silhouettes, they would have probably been confused by the familiarity of their shapes. One was very tall and one was very short. The short one walked erratically, like it was in fast forward.

"I am quite hungry," Twig said. "I don't suppose you have hot dogs?"

Evan laughed and said, "My new friend. All I have is hot dogs."

Twig smiled and licked his lips. "I haven't had a hot dog in so long. I don't suppose you have some French fries to go with the hot dogs?"

"Twig. You're being rude," Onus said.

"He's not being rude," Evan said. "He's being hungry and how can someone not be hungry at the mention of hot dogs? I don't just have French fries. I have onion rings, too."

"That's just the bee's knees," Ignatious said. "Hot dogs, French fries and onion rings? Count me in."

Ignatious's funny rhyme made Twig laugh. "Bee's knees," he said through a chuckle. "Bees have legs with joints like most insects, but they don't have kneecaps, which means they don't have knees."

Ignatious laughed along with Twig. "It's an expression I picked up from my daddy, little fella'," he explained. "It means fantastic and wonderful and all the other words that are similar to that."

I could tell you the situation Onus and Twig were in was the bee's knees, because they were about to have a wonderful meal and a full night's sleep and in the morning Ignatious was going to help them get home once and for all. But I'd be lying to you. In fact, their situation was the furthest thing from the bee's knees. It wasn't even the bee's stinger. When Onus, Twig and Ignatious turned to follow Evan back for hotdogs and French fries, they finally all noticed the silhouettes walking along the beach. How could they not notice? The two silhouettes were only a few feet from them. "Well now," the tall silhouette said as it stepped out of the shadows and into the moonlight. "Isn't this the bee's knees?"

The small silhouette frothed and growled and leaped at Onus with uninhibited ferocity. Luckily, the large man next

The Healing Sand

to it, a man the boys knew all too well, had a firm grip on the beast...a beast who they also knew all too well.

"Felix," Twig said.

"Fang," Onus said.

"How can it be?" they said together.

SIX

"Are you digging a hole to China."

I'm sure you've heard this saying before. Perhaps your father said it to you when you were at a beach digging in the sand. Or maybe your mother said it to you when you were in the garden digging holes for carrot seeds.

Uncle Sol gave me a shovel on my ninth birthday and for the first time in my life I heard this saying. I had mentioned to him that I wanted to see the world, but I had no money to do it. This was his answer to my problem. "Money Shmunny," he had said. "All you need is a little elbow grease and some determination and in no time you can dig yourself a hole to China. There's a lot to see in China. Big walls. Dragons. Palaces. You're welcome to dig your hole in my backyard."

What Uncle Sol didn't realize was the only place in the world someone could actually dig a hole to China is in South America, and we were nowhere near South America. If I tried digging a hole straight through the Earth, starting in Uncle Sol's backyard, the other side wouldn't be China, it would be the Indian Ocean, and an ocean isn't the greatest place to visit if you don't have a mask and an oxygen tank. Another thing Uncle Sol didn't realize was that if I dug straight through the Earth, I would have to pass through the Earth's core and many scientists believe the Earth's core has a temperature somewhere between three and five thousand

degrees. If I were to try to dig to China, I would have been cooked long before getting there.

But I was a nine-year-old kid and when my Uncle Sol told me I could dig a hole to China, I believed him. I set out that very afternoon of my ninth birthday to start my hole. I knew it was going to take a long time, so I wanted to get as much work in as possible before the sun went down. I dug about three feet deep the first day. The second day I dug about a foot more before I hit a layer of rock I couldn't get my shovel through. That was as far as I got with my hole to China. The only China I would be seeing was the one in my mind. I jumped out of my four-foot hole and I laid on the grass next to the hole and I imagined massive palaces with dragons protecting them. I imagined emperors with large swords practicing their battle stances in golden courtyards. My China was an amazing place and even though I wasn't there physically, I was there, and that made me happy. And whenever future situations in my life became unbearable, or unbreakable, like a layer of rock just below the Earth's surface or a math test I hadn't studied for, I would close my eyes and escape to my China.

Escaping to my China helped me a little while I was down in the hole with Mr. Flex, but eventually, all I could think about was the shovel Uncle Sol had given me on my ninth birthday. All I could think about was the person or persons who dug the hole I had fallen into. They had accomplished what I never could. They broke through that layer of rock just beneath the Earth's surface. If I had had a shovel, I could've dug my way out. Knowing now that going straight down would've put me in the Earth's hot core, I would've changed my course and tried to dig on an angle so I came out somewhere else, somewhere that was anywhere but the hole I shared with Mr. Flex. If only I had had a shovel.

Onus rubbed his eyes and looked again. Fang and Felix were still standing in front of him. Twig rubbed his eyes and looked again. Fang and Felix were still standing in front of him. It was no mirage or illusion or hallucination. The boys were both fully hydrated and fully aware that the unbelievable was occurring before their very eyes.

"I do say," Fang did say. "This long silence leads me to believe the cat has taken all of your tongues."

"Is that a monkey?" Ignatious asked.

"It's not just a monkey," Fang said and patted the top of Felix's head. "It's a hyper monkey."

"I am a doctor and I have never heard of a hyper monkey," Evan said.

Felix growled, but Fang's firm grip on the monkey's head kept him still.

"Well, isn't that the bee's knees," Fang said. "I happen to be looking for a doctor. You see, a large stuffed bear fell on me." And when Fang said this, he glared down at Onus and Twig, and even in the dark the boys could feel the intensity of this glare. It felt like two large palms wrapped around their necks, squeezing...squeezing...squeezing... "And that bear broke a bunch of my ribs and one of my arms. I won't tell you which arm it broke, but by the way my right arm is swinging limply at my side, I am sure you'll be able to guess. And what makes having a right arm broken even worse is that I am right handed. This means that for days now I have been unable to do all the things I usually take for granted. Things like tying my shoes and plucking the legs off of spiders. I have important business to conduct in a couple of days, which I will be unable to do without my right arm. I want the use of my arm back and I want it now."

"There are many doctors out there," Evan said. "Surely, you realize I am not the only one."

Onus wanted to tell Evan and Ignatious to run, but he could not speak. He spat out a, "rhu..." and a "bahh" but it was not enough to steal Evan's and Ignatious's attention. The cat that Fang had spoken of apparently did have his tongue. Twig was doing no better. His hand was in his mouth and it looked like he was trying to dig the words out of his throat. All the boys could do was stand and watch the unbelievable become even more unbelievable.

"Ahhh, but a doctor in this here town," Fang said, "will surely be able to fix me up good as new."

"And why do you think a doctor in this town does his job any different than a doctor in any other town?" Evan asked. "We all learn from the same books. We all take the same tests and we all follow the same guidelines."

Fang laughed and a flock of seagulls asleep down the beach startled and flew off. "My good doctor," Fang said when he finished laughing, "is this not the town with the legendary Healing Sand? They say it will fix anything."

"The Healing Sand," Evan repeated nervously. "That's just an urban myth, like Bigfoot and giant alligators roaming around in the sewers."

"I have met Bigfoot," Fang said, "and I have put some of those alligators in the sewer, so I know those aren't urban myths, just as I know The Healing Sand isn't an urban myth. Let me warn you, I am an impatient man and the longer I have to stand here with my ribs and my arm aching, the more angry I get."

"Well, hold on there, partner," Ignatious said. "You and your hyper monkey appear out of nowhere, just as we're about to round us up some hotdogs and French fries, and you're jabbering on about some sand that's supposed to fix you up and we're telling you we don't know anything about this sand and you're getting mad about it. You can't be that way with us. You don't even know us and we don't even know you."

"You think I'm getting mad," Fang said. "If I was to lift my hand from Felix's head he would tear you apart in seconds. My good, ignorant man, I am but a feather adrift in the wind compared to my furry compadre here. And before you speak another word, let me assure you, I do know a couple of you very very well."

Ignatious looked at Evan. "I have never seen this man and his monkey in my entire life."

"Neither have I," said Evan. "That means..."

Evan and Ignatious looked down at Onus and Twig. "Do you know this man?" Evan asked. "Do you have something to do with this man's broken bones?"

"I...we...he..." the cat holding on to Onus's tongue still had a tight grip. He still wanted to run. He still wanted to tell everyone else to run, but he couldn't.

"Those two little boys have been the bane of my existence this past week," Fang said. "And as I was lying there underneath that heavy, stuffed bear, I had plenty of time to think of all the wonderful ways I would pay them back for being that bane. I thought I might pull out their fingernails, dip those nails in wasabi and force the boys to eat them. Then I thought I might make the two of them into human pincushions. I'd take them to a large factory that makes shirts and pants and I'd strap them to an ironing board and I'd fill their little bodies full of sewing needles. I thought..."

"That's enough," Evan said. "How can you think about doing such awful things to children?"

"My good doctor," Fang said. "These are not children. These are ten-year-old tornadoes set on a path of destruction that is always heading my way. These children, as you call them, have ruined everything I have worked so hard for. Plan A, a most elaborate and expensive plan, down the drain because of these two children. Plan B, a plan almost as elaborate and expensive as Plan A, once again, down the

drain because of these two...children. My arm and my ribs are broken because of these...children."

"These children saved my life," Ignatious said. "I hardly believe a large man like yourself could be so affected by two little boys."

The hand Fang held Felix down with twitched and began tapping Felix's forehead. Felix snorted. "This conversation has gone on long enough," Fang said. "Doctor, I request that you take me to The Healing Sand now, or else..."

Onus and Twig sensed the situation was going from bad to worse. They knew they should run, but they also knew they couldn't just leave Evan and Ignatious alone with Fang and Felix. There was no easy answer to the predicament the boys had suddenly found themselves in. There were no old men in Onus's head that could offer a solution. There were no wildlife programs from television Twig could reflect upon for an idea. There was only confusion and a horrible cat that refused to let go of both their tongues.

"I have told you," Evan said, "The Healing Sand does not exist. People have been coming here for centuries looking for something that is no more real than the seven dwarves or the dragon that breathes fire. It is a fairy tale. It is a story parents tell their children."

"Enough!" Fang bellowed. He let go of Felix's head and the hyper monkey pounced on Evan, knocking him down onto the sand. "He will nibble on you, but he will not kill you until I give him the word."

Evan wriggled and twisted under Felix's powerful grip. "Get it off of me!" he yelled. "Get it off!"

"Take me to The Healing Sand!" Fang roared.

Ignatious looked down at Onus and Twig. His eyes were wide open and his pupils shifted from side to side. He was saying with his eyes, "This is not good. I'm scared silly, right now." You may be asking yourself, "How can someone say

such a thing with their eyes? Eyes don't have little mouths." Well, the eyes are one of the most expressive parts of your body and you actually say quite a bit with them all the time. Your eyes are what give you away to your parents when you are lying to them. Your eyes are what tell people there really is something wrong when your words are insisting the opposite. There is a saying that goes, "The eyes are a window to the soul." This means that other people can see your true personality when they look into your eyes because eyes never lie.

A thin strand of saliva spilled from the corner of Felix's mouth and landed on Evan's cheek. "Please get this thing off of me!" The doctor shrieked again.

"Please stop this," Ignatious said, but this time he said it with his mouth. "I'll show you where The Sand is."

"Finally," Fang said and raised his one good arm up in the air in mock relief. He stared down at Onus and Twig. "Finally," he said, "someone with a little integrity. I mean, come on boys. You know what Felix can do if I give him the go ahead. How can you just stand there and not say a word while this poor man struggles with a hungry hyper monkey that wants to eat him? I'm glad I never have to rely on the two of you for anything. Now, back to this miraculous Healing Sand."

"Get that thing off of the doctor first," Ignatious said.

"I'd ask that you refer to 'that thing' as Felix," Fang said. "He does have feelings, you know. Maybe I was a little too quick to assume you had any integrity my good man."

"Fine," Ignatious said. "Can you please get Felix off of the doctor?"

"Well, of course I can," Fang said. "You see, I am, indeed, a man of integrity."

Fang tapped Felix on the shoulder and the hyper monkey sprung from the doctor like a geyser springs from the earth... up and out. Felix's eyes didn't lie. The hyper monkey was

disappointed he didn't get a taste of doctor flesh. He lowered his head and waddled down to the ocean's edge where he kicked at the water.

"Be assured that if you are lying to me," Fang said to Ignatious, "I will not hesitate to give Felix the order to attack. All I have to do is snap my fingers a certain way and he'll be on top of you sinking his teeth into your skin. It's been a while since he last tasted flesh, and as you can clearly see, he wants it badly. So tell me, my good man, where is this Healing Sand?"

Ignatious grabbed Evan's hand and pulled him up. With his eyes, Ignatious said to Evan "I'm sorry." Evan returned a look that could have only meant, "You didn't have a choice." Or it could have meant, "You are giving away our greatest secret and I am very angry at you for doing so." But Evan's eyes were in the dark, so neither Onus nor Twig could really see what he was saying with them. Really, it could have been anything, but most likely it was, "You didn't have a choice." And that's sometimes the problem with speaking with your eyes. If it's dark, a conversation is next to impossible. Ignatious pointed toward The Sand and with his mouth he said, "It's just over there."

"Very funny," Fang said. "You can point almost anywhere on a beach and say the sand is 'just over there'."

Fang reached out and wrapped the fingers of his unbroken arm around Ignatious's neck. Evan and the boys gasped. Fang lifted Ignatious a foot and a half off the ground. Ignatious spat and choked from the pressure of Fang's grasp. "Where is The Sand!" he bellowed.

"Please, Mr. Fang," Onus said as the cat holding his tongue let loose its claws. Suddenly, he could speak again. "Leave him alone. He's had a very long day. We've all had a long day and we just want to get something to eat and rest for a while."

Fang looked down on Onus and said, "So the boy can still speak. Well, that is a relief. I was beginning to think something had happened to you since our last...encounter."

"Ignatious said he would show you where The Sand is," Onus said, "And he did. It's exactly where he pointed. So please put him down."

"It is understandable that I am having serious trust issues with people right now," Fang said. "I trusted that none of my employees would ever rat me out, especially to a couple of rotten kids, and that is exactly what happened. I trusted the men I had paid all that money to custom build an electrified pigpen. They assured me it would stand up to a few lazy pigs and a few obnoxious children. They assured me! That is why I am having such a hard time trusting you or this man I am holding onto."

"But they're not lying to you," Twig said. Amazingly, the cat had let go of his tongue, too. "The Sand is just over there."

"Well, that makes everything better now, doesn't it?" Fang said and laughed. "If the other one says it's true, then it must be true."

"It really is over there," Twig said.

"Then why don't you take me to it, boy? Take me to it or I will crush this man's neck like a soda can," Fang said.

"Put Ignatious down first," Twig said.

"Please put him down," Onus said.

"Yes," Evan said, "please put the man down. Your fingers are closing off the airway into his lungs. Without air, he might die. I am a doctor and that is my honest opinion."

"He will die, if you people keep wasting time," Fang said. "And another thing, doctor...I don't trust doctors one bit. The last doctor I saw said I had anger issues. I locked him in the trunk of my car and I drove the car off a cliff. You don't think the doctor was correct with his diagnosis, do you?"

Ignatious's head flopped from side to side. His eyes fluttered. "He's losing consciousness," Evan said, evading Fang's horrible remark.

"Then why are we still standing here?" Fang replied.

"It's over here," Twig said and ran to the spot on the beach where they had just fixed Ignatious. "It's over here! It's over here!" Onus followed closely behind him.

"So this is the mythical Healing Sand," Fang said as he approached the boys. Fang's strength was frightening. He was still holding Ignatious out in front of him with his one arm. Ignatious wasn't a big man, but he was a man nonetheless, and Fang held him in the air as though he were a small tree branch picked up after a nasty storm. A man with that kind of strength could have easily overpowered two ten-year-old boys. How they had been able to get away from Fang up until then remained a mystery.

Fang touched The Sand with his toe.

"Please put the man down," Evan said as he walked up to The Sand. His shoulders were slumped as though he had been defeated at some sort of game no one knew was being played. "Until today," he continued to say, "almost no one outside of our little community had ever seen The Sand. Until today, it was still a myth. But these boys put their own life at risk to save a man they didn't even know. Any person with a conscience couldn't possibly allow a man to die after knowing that. Any person with a conscience would do anything in his or her power to help. I made a choice to reveal The Healing Sand and in doing so I betrayed a lot of people. I do not know if I will ever regain their trust again, but I do not care. I did the right thing. Do not take this man into The Sand with you. I beg of you. Unless you have broken his neck, there is nothing wrong with him. Taking him through The Sand will cause irreversible damage. It will..."

"Enough!" Fang said. He tossed Ignatious to the ground and grabbed Evan. The boys rushed over to Ignatious's limp body.

"I do not trust anything any of you say," Fang said. "This might not even be Healing Sand. It might be Hurting Sand, and if that's true, you doctor, are going to hurt along with me."

"No!" the boys yelled together. But it was too late. Fang lifted Evan off the ground with the same arm and the same ease that he had lifted Ignatious with. He stepped into The Sand and sank down.

Onus ran to the edge of The Healing Sand and pleaded with Fang. "Please," he said. "There's nothing wrong with Evan. Please put him down. If he goes into The Sand he'll come out weird."

"Put me down!" Evan yelled as he kicked and spit at Fang.

"There's nothing wrong with weird," Fang laughed and took another step in. He sunk to his waist. "I can feel it," he said. "It tickles."

"I don't want to end up like the others!" Evan yelled. "Please!"

"It..." Fang said, but The Healing Sand was too quick and ate up the rest of his words. Fang and Evan were gone. The Sand had completely enveloped them.

Felix noticed Fang's disappearance and rushed from the water's edge to the edge of The Healing Sand. He dropped to his furry knees and plunged his furry arms into The Sand. The hyper monkey was so close to Onus that Onus could feel the fur on Felix's arms rubbing against him. Onus remembered the time he and Twig were trapped in the leg museum with Felix. He remembered being trapped in Ted's Taxidermy Shop with Felix. He remembered how frightening it was to be in such close proximity to Felix. But

the hyper monkey wasn't interested in Onus. The hyper monkey was only interested in the sand that had swallowed his Fang.

"Onus, get away from there," Twig said from behind them.

Ignatious sat up. Deep purple bruises in the shape of Fang's fingers had formed on his neck. In a scratchy voice, created by the squished in vocal chords in his neck, he said, "If there's one thing I know about monkeys, it's that they're unpredictable. Quietly and quickly step away from there, partner."

"It's okay," Onus said. "Felix is worried like I am. I don't think he means me any harm."

"Not right now," Twig said. "But what about a minute from now?" What if Fang doesn't come out of there? What will Felix feel like doing to you then?"

"I don't know," Onus said. "Hopefully, he'll..." But Onus didn't finish his thought. Felix yelped and pulled his furry arms out of The Sand. The hyper monkey stuck one of his furry hands in his mouth and began sobbing. As crazy as it sounds, Onus wanted to reach over and put an arm around Felix's shoulder. He wanted to reassure the hyper monkey that everything was going to be all right. But Onus knew Ignatious was right. Monkeys were unpredictable. And Felix wasn't a typical monkey. It was his diet of caffeine, sugar and the occasional bite of human flesh that made him this way. It was his unconventional diet that made him one of the most unpredictable creatures in the world.

"Maybe I should go in there and see if I can drag them out," Ignatious said.

Onus turned toward Ignatious and said, "There's nothing wrong with you. If you go in there, you'll turn weird."

"My neck hurts an awful lot," Ignatious said. "The Sand can fix that, can't it?"

"I don't know," Onus said. "Your neck is sore, but I don't think it's broken."

"Onus is right," Twig said. "Your neck isn't broken. The Healing Sand only fixes broken things, not sore things."

"I feel helpless here," Ignatious said and stood up. "Maybe I can find a long stick that we can poke around in the sand. Maybe they'll grab it and pull themselves out."

A flashlight clicked on and a lemony beam of light splashed onto Ignatious's face.

"Unfortunately, sir, your idea is rubbish."

The flashlight beam hopped off of Ignatious and landed on Twig's face, then it ran across the sand and stopped on Onus. Onus covered his eyes with his hands. The flashlight beam took the hint and hopped over to Felix. "Is that a monkey?"

Felix growled and the flashlight beam retreated. The beam shot into the sky, spun around, then spun back up and landed on the very round, very scary face of an unknown man. In photography, there is a form of lighting called Horror Lighting. This is when the subject is lit from low down so the light shines upwards and obscures part of the subject's face. I only know this, because my Uncle Sol was somewhat of an amateur photographer. Horror Lighting, Uncle Sol once told me, is given its spooky name because of the parts of the subject's face that remain in darkness. It is these dark parts that cause fear in the hearts of those unlucky enough to have to see such a thing. The round-faced man held his flashlight against his round chest so the beam was pointing straight up. The light split under his round chin and lit up only his round cheeks, his round lips and the bottoms of the thick glasses he wore. His eyes and the top of his head remained in darkness. A net with a dark object in it swung from the round man's round hands.

"You know it's a party when a monkey is invited," the round man said.

"This is not a party," Twig bravely said. "A party has cake and presents and people in a good mood. We have no cake or presents and we are definitely not in a good mood."

"The boy is right," Ignatious said. "The man who saved us was dragged into that Healing Sand by another man, who doesn't appear to be a very nice fellow at all. They have been down there an awful long time and nobody seems to know what to do about it."

"You folks aren't from around here, are you?" the round man asked.

"No sir, we are not," Ignatious replied.

"You say the man who saved you went into The Sand," the round man said. "What was wrong with him?"

"I didn't say he went into The Sand," Ignatious said. "I said he was dragged into The Sand. There was nothing wrong with him."

"Hmmm," the round man hummed, "that's too bad. Perhaps he is getting what he deserves."

"Why would you say something like that?" Onus said.

"The Healing Sand should have never been revealed to outsiders," the round man said. "It is for the people of Emery only. It has always been for the people of Emery only. If the little piece on my tin robot that makes sparks shoot out of its mouth breaks, I toss it in The Sand and it comes out as good as new. If your tin robot breaks, it goes in the garbage. That's just the way it is and just the way it has always been. I feel bad for your friend, but he should have never revealed our Healing Sand to you."

"My mother always taught me to respect adults," Onus said, "but sometimes adults can be very cruel. You are a very cruel person and I am not going to apologize for that."

"I'm sure your mother would be very upset with you for talking to me like that," the round man said.

"My mother isn't here, so I can say whatever I like," Onus

replied. "If you aren't going to help us get our friend out of The Sand, then maybe you should just leave."

"You can't tell me to leave my Healing Sand," the round man said. "But I can tell you to leave. So that's exactly what I'm going to do. I would like you and your friends and your monkey to please leave so I can put my broken robot into The Sand."

"We're not going anywhere," Ignatious said.

"That's right, we're not going anywhere," Twig repeated as he often did.

"Don't make me go and get a few of the locals," the round man said. "They're a little less forgiving than I am."

"Are you threatening us, partner?" Ignatious asked.

"I would never threaten children," the round man said. "Let's just say I'm giving Y'ALL a stern warning."

"FEEELIXXX!" Felix suddenly screamed and jumped up and down. Onus thought the hyper monkey was screaming at the rude, round man who was being more of a hindrance than a helper, and if that was the case, the round man was in for a world of trouble. But Felix had no interest in the rude, round man. Felix's finger was pointing at The Healing Sand where something was happening.

"The Sand is moving!" Onus yelled when he figured out what Felix was screaming about. "It's moving! It's moving!"

Ignatious and Twig ran to the edge of The Healing Sand where they joined Felix and Onus. "It is moving," Twig said.

In the dark, the moving sand looked like bubbling oil and sounded like an out-of-breath runner trying to catch his breath. "Shine your flashlight on it," Twig said to the rude, round man.

"Why should I?" the round man said.

"So they can see where they're going," Onus said.

"And because it would be a nice thing to do," Twig added.

"Trespassers do not deserve to be treated nicely," the round man said and sat down on the beach with a very loud thump. "You three and the two in The Sand are trespassing and you deserve to go to jail and rot the rest of your lives away with all the other criminals."

"But Evan's not trespassing," Twig said. "Evan lives here."

"Your friend Evan is the worst criminal in your little group," the round man said and threw a handful of sand in the boys' direction. "He has broken a sacred trust and not even The Healing Sand can fix that."

Twig wanted to respond. He wanted to tell the round man he had never met such a rude person in all his life. As he watched the dark shape of a stretched-out man appear in the rolling sand, he couldn't believe what he was feeling. (Now hold onto your hats here) Twig felt that even William Ernest Fang had more manners than the round man sitting in the sand. (Can you believe that?) But Onus grabbed Twig's arm before he could say anything and he said to Twig, "Don't say anything. It's not worth it."

I don't know if the round man had a change of heart, but the moment Twig began ignoring him a beam of light from his flashlight appeared and snaked its way along the sand, through Twig's feet and up the two massive arms that were slowly rising out of The Sand. The arms definitely belonged to Fang, which meant the stretched-out man the arms held up was definitely Evan the doctor. But Evan wasn't fighting like he had been when he went into The Sand. In fact, Evan was hardly moving at all. The flashlight beam flickered over Evan's body and the only movement Onus and Twig could see was the rising and falling of Evan's chest as he breathed.

Felix howled and beat his chest with his fists as Fang's head popped out from under The Sand. The flashlight beam

moved onto his face. Sand poured from his hair and ears. It trickled out of his nose and the corners of his eyes. Fang spit out a mouthful of sand and took in a deep breath of fresh air. The boys gasped and moved back from the edge of The Sand. Felix's joy turned to confusion. The hyper monkey screeched "FEEELIX!" and ran off down the beach. The Fang rising out of The Healing Sand was not the same Fang that went into The Healing Sand. That was for sure. This was a new Fang. This was a Fang the boys barely recognized. This was a Fang his own hyper monkey hadn't even recognized. I'm sure had you asked Fang at that very moment, he would have said this new Fang was, "a disappointingly less evil Fang."

"His eye is gone," Twig whispered to Onus.

"His eye isn't gone," Onus replied. "His eye is back to the way it's supposed to be."

The Healing Sand, that magical piece of earth that took broken things and fixed them, had fixed Fang's pupil-less eye. It had given him a brand new shiny black pupil to match the one that was in his good eye. Black pupils are scary, don't get me wrong, but they're nowhere near as scary as an eye without a pupil...an eye that has the power to hypnotize people, insects and swans.

Fang tossed Evan's body onto the beach like he was tossing an old rug onto a scrap heap. Evan rolled twice and stood up. Evan shook his head, brushed the sand off his clothes and did not move again.

"Something's not right!" Fang bellowed as he shook off the last of the sand clinging to him. "I feel way too good."

"You've been fixed," Twig said.

"Dogs get fixed, my misguided little child," Fang said. "People get healed."

"You've been healed then," Twig said.

Fang reached out and snatched Twig by his collar. With his previously broken arm he lifted Twig off the ground and

raised him up so they were at the same eye level. Even in the dark, Twig could see Fang's two black pupils staring straight at him. They were ferocious in their intensity, but useless in what they were attempting to accomplish.

"Put him down!" Onus yelled.

"Do you not feel anything, boy?" Fang asked.

"Put the boy down," Ignatious said.

"Are you not getting dizzy?" Fang said.

The round man shone his flashlight on Fang's face and said, "Maybe you should put the boy down." Fang jerked his head toward the round man. The round man jumped up off the ground and clicked off his flashlight.

"And who might you be, friend?" Fang said with false sincerity.

"My name is Dudley and you're trespassing on my beach," the round man whose name was Dudley said. "I would like you all to leave now so I can fix my robot, or else there's going to be trouble."

"Trouble, you say?" Fang said and opened the hand in which he held Twig. Twig fell to the beach and hit the ground harder than he thought he would, but the pain of the fall didn't stop him from scurrying away from Fang as fast as his legs could take him. Fang took a long step in Dudley's direction. "Trouble is my second favourite word in this wonderful language we speak, friend. Perhaps a little trouble is what I need to get rid of this good feeling rushing through my body."

Dudley turned to run, but Fang was too quick for him. Fang took two more long steps and grabbed Dudley by the back of his shirt. "Don't leave just yet, friend," Fang said. "We're just getting started here."

"Let go of me!" Dudley yelled. "Let go of me or I'll get the locals! And trust me, you don't want to deal with the locals."

Something unexpected had happened to Fang when he went into The Healing Sand. He lost his ability to hypnotize people. It was this ability that separated Fang from other villains who claimed to be evil, and it was this ability that motivated Fang to attempt many of his unbelievable plans. Seriously, would a person who couldn't hypnotize people try to take people's legs from them without them even knowing? Without this motivating factor, Fang was no different than any of the other villains out there who talked a lot of nasty talk, but didn't have a single nasty plan to their credit.

Twig, Onus and Ignatious huddled together and slowly backed away from the confrontation between Dudley and Fang.

Fang lifted Dudley with so much ease it was like Dudley was made of paper and balsa wood instead of bones and muscle and skin. Dudley's short, round legs kicked and his round body jiggled as he tried to free himself from Fang's grasp, but Fang wasn't letting go. "You're from around these parts," Fang said as he looked up into Dudley's eyes. "So tell me, friend...How do I get my eye back?"

"I...I saw your face clearly when you came out of The Sand," Dudley squealed. "There's...there's nothing wrong with your eye."

"My eye is gone!" Fang roared. "And I want it back!"

"I saw your eyes," Dudley cried. "I see them now in the moonlight. There is nothing wrong with them and even if there was, The Sand would have fixed the problem."

"It wasn't a problem!" Fang said. "It was...it was me. The Sand took a part of me with it and I want that back!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dudley cried. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry."

"You're useless," Fang said and tossed Dudley to the ground. Dudley flipped onto his hands and knees and

scuttled away leaving his robot half buried in the beach and even more broken than it had previously been. Fang huffed and scanned the dark beach. "I say, where is that good doctor? He'll help me get my eye back. Ahh, there you are."

When Fang reached Evan he was surprised to see Onus, Twig and Ignatious standing there beside him. "What do you want?" Fang asked no one in particular.

The three of them stepped in front of Evan and shielded him from Fang. "We want you to leave," Ignatious said.

"You said you wanted your arm healed and now it is," Onus said.

"So please leave us alone so we can help Evan," Twig said.

Fang eyed each of them individually and said, "There's nothing wrong with the doctor. I'm the one with the problem here."

"You took him into The Sand and there was nothing wrong with him," Onus said.

"Now he's...weird," Twig said.

"Being weird is not a problem!" Fang yelled. This caused Onus, Twig and Ignatious to back up two steps. "Losing your power to hypnotize is a problem and I want it fixed."

"You say you want that eye of yours fixed and you say that being weird is not a problem," Ignatious said, "so why don't you just walk through that there Healing Sand again."

Fang looked back at the dark spot on the beach that had fixed his arm, but stole his eye. Onus and Twig looked up at Ignatious. Had Ignatious not been listening to everything they had just said? Nothing was wrong with Fang. Even in the dark they could see him wink at them. That's when the boys realized Ignatious was trying to trick Fang. And it looked like it was about to work.

"Nonsense!" Fang hollered and turned back. "Do you really think I am that gullible?"

Fang swung his newly-fixed arm and hit Ignatious hard in the head. Ignatious dropped to the sandy beach like a rock being dropped from a hand. He tried to stand up, but he stumbled and fell forward, face first into the sand. "Ha!" Fang whooped. "He looks like an ostrich. You boys know that an ostrich buries its head in the sand when it feels it's in danger. I suggest you get out of the way and let me talk to the doctor or you'll end looking like ostriches, too."

"Ostriches don't bury their heads when they feel like they're in danger," Twig boldly said. "That's just a myth. Ostriches lay their necks and heads flat on the ground so from a distance they look like a mound of dirt, tricking any would be predator."

"There is nothing worse than a smart-alec kid," Fang said. "And you, little boy, are a smart alec."

Twig laughed. "My name isn't Alec. It's Twig. I'm a smart Twig."

"You'll be a broken Twig if you and your little friend Onus don't step out of the way," Fang said and had a laugh himself. "Broken Twig. That's quite funny."

The boys didn't move. Fang growled and grabbed them both by the collar of their shirts. It may have been dark, but the man's precision was spot on. He twisted the collars so they tightened around the boys' necks. Twig sputtered and coughed. Onus heaved and hacked. "All these silly, little games...all these little moments of joy are over, boys. I need my eye back and only our doctor friend can help me with that." Fang lifted the boys up and tossed them like they were bags of garbage.

You would think that being tossed onto a sandy beach would be a lot better than being tossed onto a grassy hill or rocky basketball court, but you would be wrong. When Onus hit the beach it hurt. When Twig hit the beach it hurt even worse.

Onus looked around him and saw only darkness. How far had Fang tossed him? He could hear the soft sound of the ocean lapping up against the beach. He could hear the faint sound of something, or someone, snoring. "Twig," he shouted. "Are you alright?"

From a few feet away, far enough to be out of sight, Onus heard Twig's voice. "I think...I think I now know what Ignatious felt like when he was tossed from his horse."

"Twig, did you break a bone?"

"No, I don't think so, but I think I'll have some nasty bruises in the morning."

"Well, if you didn't break anything, you couldn't know what Ignatious felt like."

Before Twig could respond, if in fact, he was going to respond, Fang's loud roar ripped across the beach. "ARRRR! What's wrong with this man?"

The word "roar" is usually used to describe the sound animals like lions make when they are angry. When an animal like a lion is roaring, your best bet is to turn and run away from it. But Onus and Twig knew they couldn't run away from this angry animal. Roaring animals also have the tendency to kill. The boys fought off the pain dancing through their bodies and ran in the direction of Fang's roar.

Under the slowly passing moon, the beach was a world of shadows and glimpses of things unknown. It was easy to mistake a forgotten water toy for a serpent, or a trio of sleeping herons for a three-headed monster. What wasn't easy to mistake was what Fang was about to do to Evan the doctor. Fang's fixed right arm was raised high above his head and his hand was clenched. Onus yelled, "Nooooooo!" and Twig yelled, "Please, noooooo!" but it was too late. Fang brought his clenched hand down on Evan's head so hard that it pushed the poor doctor's feet an inch or two down into the sand.

Onus arrived just before Fang could deliver Evan another blow. "Please, Mr. Fang, stop it or you'll...you'll kill him."

"That's what I'm trying to do you insipid little boy," Fang growled. "This doctor is about as helpful as a man with no arms trying to point you in the right direction."

Twig stepped up beside Onus. "He's...weird. That's what we've been trying to tell you. There was nothing wrong with him and you took him through The Sand. Now...now..."

"Now what?" Fang roared. "Now he just stands there and stares blankly into space?"

"I guess if he can't move or he can't say anything, he can't hurt himself, or get himself into any trouble," Twig said.

"Which means he will always remain...perfect," Onus said.

"Perfect according to whom?" Fang said, his arm still precariously positioned high above Evan's head. "How is someone who can't do or say anything perfect? This man is nothing more than a shell, but that's not fair to the shells, because shells are nice to look at and punch holes through and turn into pieces of jewellery. I can't turn this man into a piece of jewellery, can I? I can't do anything with this man except hit him over the head. At least that will make me feel better."

"Don't you think helping him will make you feel better?" Onus innocently asked.

"Hah!" Fang laughed. "The only person I help is myself and usually it's to more...more stuffing during Thanksgiving dinner...more cola when nobody's looking...more legs and hair before you two little brats destroyed everything!"

The boys sensed a change in Fang. His anger was shifting back to them. They both knew it was crazy and a little bit (okay, well, a lot) dangerous to remain near the man. But they also knew they had to keep Fang from killing Evan, even if that meant putting their own lives in danger. Evan

rescued them from certain demise and now they had to rescue Evan.

"My father always tells me that selfishness is an illness and a good helping of kindheartedness is the only way to make a selfish person better," Onus said.

"Your father has obviously never felt the joy of taking something someone else has wanted, therefore your father is an idiot," Fang rudely stated. "If I had my eye I would turn your glorious doctor here into one of my lackeys and I would tell him to take you two down to the water and drown you and then I'd tell him to find your father and smack him in the head for being so sappy and good. Yes, that's exactly what I'd do if I had my eye right now. 'Doctor,' I'd say. 'Make me feel better and destroy these children.'"

After Fang stopped speaking and the chill passed through both Onus and Twig's body, a very weird and unfortunate thing happened. Evan reached out both his hands with lightning quickness and grabbed Onus and Twig by the stretched out collars of their well worn and now very smelly shirts. He opened his mouth, and in a cold, almost robot-like voice he repeated Fang's last three frightening words. "Destroy the children."

SEVEN

It's always strange, and a little surprising, when someone you know who is good says something or does something that is bad. When I was a child in school I sat next to a girl named Paulina Bones. Everyone thought Paulina was the coolest person ever, not only because she had such a cool last name, but also because she was always spearheading the most amazing campaigns to help people in need. A fellow student – I think his name was Bently, or it might have been Jim – lost his house when a feral cat snuck in through a basement window and dropped the mouse he was carrying in his mouth. Of course, dropping a mouse is not going to destroy a house unless that mouse weighs a thousand pounds and it is dropped from a passing satellite. This mouse simply ran off and gnawed a hole in the wall and gnawed straight through an electrical wire that sparked and ignited a pile of old Chinese restaurant menus Bently's (or Jim's) father had received in the mail and forgotten to recycle. As I am sure you know, fire is a most horrible and dangerous thing. You remember what it did to Fang's casino in Omniville. In a similar fashion, this fire quickly spread throughout the basement, then up and through the rest of the house. Luckily, Bently (or Jim) and the rest of his family heard the fire alarms and escaped. The home and everything inside of it was completely destroyed.

All of Bently's (or Jim's) toys, clothes, ants and sugar-crystal experiments were gone. All he had left were the pajamas he was wearing when he escaped the burning house. Ironically, the pajamas were covered in brightly-coloured flames.

Paulina was not a friend of Bently (or Jim), but once she heard about Bently's (or Jim's) loss, she was compelled to go door to door in our neighbourhood and ask the residents if they had anything they could donate to the family to help them rebuild their lives. It was a very noble, unselfish act. After a few days of going door to door Paulina had collected four garbage bags full of clothes, two garbage bags full of toys, one garbage bag full of canned food and even an old ant farm someone didn't use anymore. She even spent an hour in her mother's garden searching for ants to fill the farm. That's just the type of person Paulina Bones was. The newspaper and the local television station was there when she handed her collection over to Bently's (or Jim's) family. Pictures were snapped, people clapped and cheered and the mayor declared Paulina Bones was our little city's *Person Of The Year*. The day after the whole media show, Paulina came to school wearing a new jacket, new boots and a new necklace she claimed to cost more than one-hundred dollars. Everyone figured her parents bought her the expensive gifts as a reward for her noble actions. The day after that she came to school wearing a new watch and a pair of diamond earrings she claimed to cost more than one-hundred dollars. Again, everyone thought they were gifts given to her because of all her good deeds. The day after that she came to school on a shiny new pink bike she claimed to cost more than two-hundred dollars. On that same day a police officer came to our classroom and asked if he could speak to Paulina for a few minutes in private. She never returned...

A hundred different stories about what happened to Paulina circled around the playground and the schoolyard

that day, but it wasn't until the evening when we all found out what really happened. The same television news reporter who had declared Paulina a hero and shining example of what all children should aspire to be was now declaring her a thief and a disappointment. Paulina had gathered garbage bags full of things to give to Bently's (or Jim's) family, but she had also gathered a shopping bag full of money. On the day she handed over everything, the shopping bag full of money was not among the donations. An anonymous report came into the television station from someone who had given Paulina one-hundred dollars to give to Bently's (or Jim's) family. When they saw the list of items Paulina had collected and saw that there was no money mentioned, they became suspicious.

Paulina Bones was a good person, but somewhere along the way something happened that made her do something bad, and to the rest of her classmates, there was a shocking revelation that came from this. If Paulina Bones could be swayed, what hope was there for the rest of us...and for the rest of society?

When Evan the doctor grabbed the boys and said, "Destroy the children," both Onus and Twig had a shocking revelation. If Evan, a man they only knew as kind and good-hearted, could so easily change and want to hurt them, what hope did they have getting home, or even surviving the night?

"What's wrong with you?" Onus asked as he attempted to squirm out of Evan's grasp.

"You're a doctor," Twig said as he too attempted to squirm out of Evan's grasp. "You're supposed to help people, not destroy them."

Fang's lips started to quiver, then his nose started to twitch and his cheeks started to bob up and down. All the anger he had stored from losing his magic eye was slipping

away. Had the boys looked up at Fang's face, they would have seen a most frightening and disturbing sight...they would have seen the slow formation of a smile. "Well well well," Fang said. "It appears our good doctor friend has changed his mind about helping you boys out, and I must say, I couldn't be happier right now."

"Please let us go," Twig said. "You're stretching out the collar in my shirt and I just don't think it can be stretched any more."

"I mean, I just feel so good," Fang laughed. "This man must be a doctor. I wonder what other wonderful things he can do?"

"Leave him alone," Onus said. "Leave us all alone."

"Ahhh, but how can I do that when the prospect of something so amazing is right in front of me...both literally and metaphorically," Fang said. "And if you don't understand what that means, then maybe you should have spent a little more time paying attention to your teacher."

Evan's grasp on the boys was lock tight. Onus thought about kicking him in the shins, but he knew how much that would hurt having once been kicked in the shins by his sister Isis when they fought over the last piece of cheesecake. It wouldn't be right to hurt someone who had helped them so much. He would continue to squirm, and resort to the shin kicking only as a last resort. Twig had given up completely and simply stood still awaiting Fang's, Evan's, or Onus's next move. His head was slumped, but every so often a fleck of moonlight sparked off of the tears pooled in the corner of his eyes.

"Oh, where is Felix?" Fang said. "He should be here enjoying this whole moment."

Fang made a circle with his thumb and index finger and placed them in his mouth. He took a deep breath in, then blew. An ear-splitting screech blasted out of his mouth. The

sound echoed up and down the beach. He pulled his fingers out of his mouth and yelled, "Felix, come!"

Within seconds the sound of panting and snarling broke into the other night sounds. And out of the darkness a soaked hyper monkey appeared. A large fish was speared through his claws. Felix bit off its tail and looked up at Fang.

"Looks like a good catch, my hyper little friend," Fang said and patted the monkey's wet head. "You're not the only one who has caught something, though. Take a look. Our good doctor friend was like a hook and his awful goodness was the bait and our two friends Onus and Twig took it. Ha! Just like a stupid fish takes a worm...or a monkey claw takes a stupid fish."

Felix stuck his whole hand in his mouth and devoured what remained of his catch. Fang let out a hearty laugh and said, "Silly hyper monkeys...always thinking about their stomachs."

Whenever Felix was around, Onus's and Twig's heart beat a little faster and a tingly feeling grew in each boy's chest. They were sure Felix thought about more than just his stomach. They were sure he also thought about the time in the leg museum where Onus sprayed him with a fire extinguisher or the time in Omniville where they knocked Gertrude the bear on top of him. And I don't know about you, but if two ten-year-old boys had done those things to me, I would have been harbouring some ill will toward them...more simply put, I'd be angry. Felix bounced over to Evan and the boys and sniffed them one by one. Onus and Twig knew their best chance at not upsetting Felix was to remain completely quiet and completely still. Onus stopped squirming.

"He's just curious boys," Fang said. "No need to worry...yet."

Fang walked over to Evan and gave him a hard nudge. Evan was as stiff as a statue and did not move or loosen his

grip on the boys. "Interesting," Fang said. "I wonder why he grabbed you boys? Let me think...let me think. What happened just before he said 'destroy the children'? Well now..."

Fang tapped his index finger against his chin and squished his face up like he was trying to squeeze the thought out of his brain like you squeeze spilled orange juice out of a sponge. "I think I was talking about what I'd do if I had my eye. Yes, that's exactly what I was talking about. I said that if I had my eye I would tell the doctor to make me feel better and then I'd destroy the children."

"Destroy the children," Evan repeated in his cold, robotic voice. His grip tightened making it harder for both Onus and Twig to breath.

"Please stop this," Twig whimpered before coughing.

"You're choking us," Onus said as he attempted to pry Evan's fingers from his tightened shirt collar.

"Oh, this is so very delightful," Fang declared and clapped. "What if I said, 'Doctor, lift the boys up?'"

Without hesitation the boys were high up in the air. Their feet kicked and swung back and forth like snapped power lines dangling in a destructive wind. Fang clapped again. "Not even my lackeys were this obedient," he said. "This is so much fun."

"Onus," Twig wheezed. "Why is Evan doing what Fang says? Why won't he do what we say?"

"I don't know, Twig. Maybe it's because Fang's an adult and his voice is deeper than ours. But that's just a guess."

"Onus, I'm having trouble breathing. My head is getting light, like if it was a balloon, it would pop off my neck and float off into space."

"Just stop talking, Twig. You're using up too much of your energy talking. Just keep trying to get Evan to let go."

"Yes, you two do that," Fang laughed. "I'm sure the good

doctor is getting tired holding the two of you up. I'm sure he'll let go any second now."

"Maybe he's right," Onus said. "Maybe Evan will get tired and let us go."

Fang laughed again. "It seems your teacher has neglected to teach you about sarcasm as well. Oh, how I'd get things ship shape if I was running the education system."

Felix must have sensed the joy Fang was feeling because the hyper monkey slapped his furry hands against his chest, he howled and hooted, then dropped to the sand and began rolling around.

"Look at how much fun everybody is having," Fang said. "Well everyone but the two of you...and that man with his head in the sand. And really, I don't even know if our good doctor is having any fun, so really, that leaves just Felix and myself."

"Fun is flying a kite or climbing a tree," Onus said through heavy wheezing. "This is just cruel."

"To some people, cruel is fun," Fang said. "Now where was I? Ah yes, have I ever got a wonderful idea. I think there's an old saying that goes something like, if you can't beat them, make them join you. I will get Evan to throw the two of you into that lovely sand and then you will obey my every word. That, my little friends, is the best way to dispose of one's sworn enemies. Do you not agree?"

Twig kicked harder and dug his fingernails deeper into Evan's hands. "Onus, I don't want to be weird. I want to be a normal kid who rides bikes down steep hills and kicks cans."

Onus wished he had kicked Evan in the shins, because he didn't want to be weird either. All he wanted was to be home. Usually, he had the strength to reassure Twig everything would be alright, but having spent up all that strength trying to free himself from Evan's grasp, he was without words.

"Throw them in The Healing Sand," Fang said.

"Throw them in The Healing Sand," Evan robotically repeated. He stepped toward the patch of beach that contained The Healing Sand. His arms stayed stiff, holding the boys far enough in front of him that they couldn't connect with one of their kicks or punches. They squirmed and screamed, but Evan wasn't going to let go. Behind them Fang laughed and Felix howled. The combination of the two sounds sounded like a sick sea creature signaling its need for some kind of medical attention.

"I'd take swan lice on my head any day over being weird," Twig said as they neared The Healing Sand. "I'd even take not being able to see again. At least I could still choose what I wanted to do."

Onus nodded his head in agreement. In the dark, Twig probably hadn't seen him nod, but it was the best he could do. The power to choose was something Onus had never thought about before, but he knew it was something he too did not want to lose.

Choice is an amazing little perk to life that many of us take for granted. I did not choose to fall into the deep dark hole and spend days and days and days with the smelly Mr. Flex. Had I been walking along and noticed the hole I would have surely chosen to step around it, as I am sure you would have chosen to do. The choices we make sometimes carry with them great consequences, but they are still done by us and not by others. In the case of Onus's sister Isis, she chose to compete against Onus in a meatball-eating contest and we all know what happened to her. Twig chose to take his chances with one last bite of tomato soup and he lost his eyesight. I chose to trust that Sparks the cat was no more than a typical house cat and, well...I am where I am today partially because of that choice. For better or for worse, choice is a big part of what makes us human. And when we

lose the ability to choose, we become...well, in this case, we become weird.

What everyone failed to notice as Evan carried the boys toward The Healing Sand was a large gray cloud forming only a couple of dozen feet or so above their heads, following them step for step. As it was still so very dark, it was understandable that no one noticed the cloud, but there it was, getting thicker and darker. I am sure you have seen a cartoon or two when one of the characters walks around with a gray cloud over their head. This usually signifies the character has bad luck or is feeling gloomy. The case for both these things could be made for Onus and Twig. It was bad luck that Fang ended up on the very same beach as Onus and Twig at the very same time and that through a series of strange and unforeseen events Evan ended up in The Healing Sand and became weird, thus leading to the capture of Onus and Twig through Fang's suggestion. Both Onus and Twig were feeling very gloomy not only because their friend Evan had turned on them against his will, but also because they were about to be thrown into The Healing Sand where they too would become weird and would be forced to do whatever Fang asked of them. So if this was a cartoon, a gray cloud over their heads would make sense, but this wasn't a cartoon...this was real life.

Onus felt the first drop of rain and looked up. Where once a billion stars twinkled, now there was only gray. "There's a large cloud following us," he said.

"That's impossible Onus," Twig said. "The only time a cloud follows above someone is in the cartoons and this isn't a cartoon...this is real life."

"But look up Twig. There is a cloud following us and it's starting to rain on us."

Twig couldn't deny there was rain spattering against his forehead and dripping off the end of his nose. "What's going

on, Onus?" he said as he looked up at the mysterious cloud. "Why is it raining on us and only on us?"

The rain that fell on them suddenly got very cold and hard, like tiny, pebble-sized ice cubes.

"It's hail," Onus yelled and covered his head with his arms. The little hail pellets stung as they pelted against the boys' bodies...and the weather kept getting worse. The closer they got to The Healing Sand, the larger the hail pellets got. But as odd as that was, what was even odder was that as the hail got larger it stopped hitting the boys and only hit Evan...on his head...on his outstretched arms...on his feet.

"Throw them in the sand!" Fang bellowed from behind them. "Do it now and do it fast!"

Evan's pace picked up and so did the rate at which the hail fell. The pellets of hail turned into golf balls of hail and the golf balls of hail quickly turned into baseballs of hail. The hail bounced off Evan like he was made of rubber. He did not make a sound or even flinch at what would be unbearable pain to a human who wasn't weird. His brain was programmed to toss the boys in The Sand and nothing was going to stop him.

Hail balls whirled past Onus's ear, but somehow they never hit him. He looked back and saw a whole row of car headlights, like the eyes attached to a pack of massive, wild animals, heading down the beach toward them. He hoped it was help. He hoped Dudley had stayed true to his word and found a few locals to teach Fang a lesson or two about respecting other's property. So much hail was now falling that the image of the headlights blurred from Onus's sight.

"What's happening Onus?" Twig yelled over the crackling sound of the hail crashing into the hail that had already fallen. "Why isn't it slowing him down and why does it keep changing direction just before it hits me?"

Onus didn't have an answer and was no longer concerned

with the hail. They had reached The Healing Sand, because Evan was slowing down. "No matter what happens," Onus yelled, "you will always be Twig Lohman. Fang may be able to tell you what to do, but he can't tell you who you are. You are Twig Lohman."

He saw Twig smile as a mellon-sized hail ball whizzed past his face. "And you are Onus Livesay," Twig yelled.

Evan swung back the arm he was holding Twig with and then with little effort he tossed Twig like a pitcher tosses a baseball. Shards of light from the oncoming headlights snuck through cracks in the wall-like hail that fell, and lit up the path of the flying boy. The mellon-sized chunks curved and shifted around Twig's fast moving body so not a single piece hit him and then he was gone. The wall of hail closed up around them. Out of sight but not out of mind. Onus felt his whole body shift and then he was in the air. Hail whizzed past him as fast as he whizzed past the hail, but never did the boy and the hail collide. His flight was only momentary, but in that moment he felt an amazing sense of peace. The crackling of the hail against the ground was all he heard. It was a comforting sound. It reminded him of the time a package arrived at the house a couple of years earlier. The item in the package, a lamp or a Dictaphone (it didn't really matter what it was), was wrapped in a sheet of plastic bubbles. He remembered Isis tossing the sheet to the floor and jumping up and down on it. It crackled and popped just like the hail was doing. "Go ahead," he remembered her saying. "It's a ton of fun." As I said it was only momentary, because as soon as he remembered Isis saying "It's a ton of fun," Onus hit the beach, only it wasn't sand that covered this section of the beach, it was a thick layer of ice created by the force of the hail crashing together.

He blindly slid along the ice until he bumped into a shivering Twig. "It's...It's so cold," Twig said.

"It froze over The Healing Sand," Onus said as he tried to keep his hands from touching the ice. "How can that be?"

"Simple. I asked a passing cloud if I could catch a ride and then I politely asked it to drop a whole bunch of hail on the man who was carrying the two of you. The cloud was nice enough to ask the hail if it would freeze the ground so the two of you wouldn't fall into that nasty sand."

"That doesn't make any sense at all," Onus said. "Clouds aren't alive, therefore you can't ask a cloud to do something. Wait...that wasn't your voice, Twig. Is that you Isis?"

The two boys looked around, but in the dark and in the middle of a thick hailstorm all they could see was black and the even blacker circular shadows of the hail balls dropping all around them.

"Isis," Onus shouted. "I know that was you. Where are you?"

"Isis is here?" Twig said and suddenly felt much warmer.

"I sure am." A tiny light flickered a few feet from the boys. The light grew larger and brighter and as it moved toward the boys it lit up the falling hail and the ice that had frozen overtop of the beach.

"Look," Twig said. "Look inside the light. It's...It's Isis."

The light covered Isis's body like a thin layer of skin. It looked like she had been dipped in light, like an ice-cream cone that had been dipped in chocolate. The thought of his sister being lifted up by the feet and slowly dipped into a bucket of light made Onus chuckle.

"She looks like an angel," Twig said.

"She is an angel," Onus said. "She's our angel."

"You boys looked like you needed a hand," Isis said.

Onus put his hands on the ice and lifted himself up. It was cold, but it didn't matter. Isis was there! When Onus was standing, he wrapped his arms around his sister as best

he could. But a hug is a hard thing to give to a ghost. Even though they couldn't feel the hug, Isis's light grew brighter and a great warmth coursed through Onus's body. The hail falling all around them bounced off the ice and sounded like the applause of an audience happy for the reunion. "I can't believe I get to see you again," Onus said.

"I can't believe you two aren't home yet," Isis said.

"It has been a very long day, Icy, and I am so tired," Onus said. "Home is all I can think about...and now it seems further away than ever."

"Onus, you just have to close your eyes and you can be home anytime you like."

"If that was true, I would never open my eyes again," Onus said and released his ghostly sister from his embrace. The warmth in his body remained.

Twig fought off the chills in his body and lifted himself up off the ice. "It's so good to see you Isis," he said. "Do you think we could catch a ride on your cloud and get out of here?"

"Oh Twig. If only it was that simple," Isis said. "The two of you are far too heavy to be carried by a cloud and by helping you out more than I already have, I'd be breaking my contract and then I'd really be in trouble. They said I had fifteen minutes before I had to be back and the cloud ride took almost six minutes. I could have just snapped my fingers and appeared, but I needed the cloud to freeze the beach. I saw what happens when someone who doesn't have anything wrong with them falls into that sand. It's not nice. I've asked the cloud to continue dropping hail for the next half hour. It's so thick that no one will be able to see you. You should be able to sneak away from here."

"But where do we go?" Onus asked. "The mox that was carrying us home is long gone and we don't have a clue where we are."

"I know how clever you are and I know how clever Twig can be," Isis said. "Remember the time you built the machine to wake you up in the morning...the one that sprayed a mist of cold water on your face? It was so clever. If you can build something like that, you can surely find your way home. And the sooner you get home the better. Mom and dad really need you right now."

"What are you talking about, Icy?" Onus said. "What's wrong with mom and dad?"

"I'm sorry. I just can't tell you any more than I already have," Isis said. "I wish I could, but by doing so..."

"You'd be breaking your contract. I know," Onus said, finishing off his twin sister's sentence, which is something he used to do all the time. "I wish I could tear that contract into little bitty pieces and throw it in the garbage."

"But it is that contract that lets me see you," Isis said. "Every second of every day large groups of things arrive up there that need to be counted. Stickbugs. Birds. Antelope. People. There are very few counters. So if I hadn't signed that contract, I would still be counting now and you'd most likely be in that sand."

"If you hadn't signed that contract," Twig chimed in, "we'd probably still be stuck in that dungeon in Fang's castle. Or even worse, we'd have wooden legs by now. It's a good thing you signed that contract."

There was a beautiful moment where they all stopped speaking and the crackling of the falling hail was all they could hear. In that moment, Onus, Isis and Twig shared bittersweet smiles. As unfair as the contract seemed, it was something very special that needed to be cherished, for you see, when most people go to the place where people go when they turn purple, they are never ever seen by their loved ones again. Twig knew this. Isis knew this. And Onus knew this.

A moment usually only lasts a second or two, but can feel like an eternity. Depending on what's happening in that moment, the eternal feeling can be a good thing or a bad thing. It was only a moment that I was in the air as I fell from the top of the hole to the bottom, but in that moment I was able to think about a life's worth of memories and about all the possibilities of what might happen to me when I hit the bottom. It was a long and unpleasant moment. The moment shared between Onus, Isis and Twig felt like an eternity, but it was the complete opposite of my moment. It was filled with happy thoughts of water balloon fights and sugar-crystal experiments. It was filled with appreciation for the opportunity they were given to still see one another. It was, unfortunately, cut short as Evan suddenly appeared in the light being cast by Isis's glow. He was flying through the air with his elbow out in front of him. With great speed and force he came crashing down on the ice between Onus and Twig. A crack formed in the ice underneath him. "Destroy the children," he said and smashed his elbow down onto the ice again. The crack grew wider and longer.

"You have to get out of here!" Isis yelled. "I can tell the cloud to drop bigger balls of hail on him, but there's nothing else I can do."

Evan pounded the ice again with his elbow and smaller cracks began to form in the ice.

"We have to get out of here!" Twig yelled. "He's breaking the ice apart."

The light glowing from Isis blinked out and the hail balls quickly grew to the size of basketballs. They fell even faster and there were even more of them smashing down on Evan's body. But instead of knocking Evan out cold as any other person would have been had they been hit on the head with just one of these hail balls, they exploded into thousands of little pieces. It was as if Evan's body was made of stone. He

brought his elbow down onto the ice again and again and with each blow, the boys knew the crack was growing wider and longer.

"Destroy the children," Evan repeated.

"We have to run!" Twig yelled.

"Where's Isis?" Onus said. "I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to her."

"If we don't go now," Twig said, "we'll get to say hello and goodbye when she's counting us into the place where people go when they turn purple."

Onus knew Twig was right. They had to go and they had to go fast. "Let's go!" Onus yelled, but it was too late. A crack like thunder ripped across the icy beach and the ground under the two boys shifted. Onus lost his balance and fell to the ice.

Twig stood firm, but not for long. It felt like he was on a slippery tablecloth and someone was trying to pull it out from under him. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself at home driving his radio-controlled car. He tried to imagine his mother calling him down to the kitchen for a quick snack of ants on a log. He loved ants on a log. How could anyone ever think that peanut butter, raisins and celery was a bad mix? Twig tried to imagine these things, but all he could hear was the sound of Evan's elbow crashing against the ice, the sound of the ice cracking and the sound of the hail falling down onto the ice. The reality of his situation was too hard to ignore. Another thunder-like crack roared from beneath his feet and sent Twig sliding. "Onus!" he yelled. "Where are you?" He yelled as loud as he could but the orchestra of icy sounds was too loud. He could barely hear himself think. A basketball sized piece of hail whizzed by his nose and exploded in front of him. The shards of ice tripped him up and knocked him down onto his bum. He flipped onto his stomach and clawed at the ice, but lacking the actual claws

he would have needed to grab hold, he continued sliding. The icy ground shifted again and rumbled like something big and ugly was underneath it trying to free itself.

"Grab hold of my leg!"

Onus's dark silhouette appeared next to him, but Onus wasn't moving. It looked like he was holding onto a large, broken shard of the icy ground. Twig reached out for Onus's pant leg, but like everything around them, it was frozen and it slid right through his hands.

Onus saw Twig's dark shape disappear into the falling hail in front of him. He wished it wasn't so dark, so he could see where Twig was heading. He wished he were anywhere other than on that beach at that very moment. He'd even rather have been at the dentist's office staring down a giant screeching drill than be there. But as hard as he closed his eyes and as hard as he wished, he knew the situation was not going to change. What would the old men who used to play chess in his head tell him to do?

His arms were numb from the ice he was holding on to. It was only a matter of moments before he would have to let go. "Isis," he said. "If you can hear me right now, I could really use some light. I have to go get Twig, but I can't see where he is."

He knew Isis could hear him. Even with her up in the place where people go when they turn purple, they had a connection. They were twins. Succumbing to a baseball-sized meatball stuck in the esophagus wasn't going to sever that connection. And like that the hail stopped falling and the dimmer switch on the moon was raised to full power. He couldn't see perfectly, but he could see he had very little time. Evan was gone and Twig was on the edge of a large crack in the ice struggling not to go over.

The slope of the icy surface Onus was lying on was far too steep to attempt to walk down, but if he let go and began

sliding too fast he might go over the edge of the crack and he was pretty sure that what lay at the bottom of that crack was The Healing Sand. Dealing with problems had never been so difficult. Yes, in the past he would just shut his eyes tight and one of the old men playing chess in his head would shout out an answer, but the old men were gone, nothing more than dust on Onus's brain. There wasn't enough time to regret not drinking enough water earlier in the day, but let that be a lesson to you next time your mother tells you that you need to drink more water. Water is essential to life and for some, essential to problem solving.

"I can figure this out," Onus said and closed his eyes tight. The goal was to get to Twig without sliding over the edge. What I need is a tool, he thought, or anything that has a sharp tip on it that I can dig into the ice and use like a brake. He looked around him, but all he could see were shards of ice and even though they were sharp and could probably poke an eye out or put a good-sized hole in a person, one piece of ice just wasn't hearty enough to break through another piece of ice without breaking itself into pieces. Onus wished his sister would appear and take his hand and steadily lead him down the ice to Twig, but he knew Isis had done all she could. He was sure the act of making the moon brighter broke her contract in some way. Everything seemed to break the contract. He only hoped she wasn't suffering because of him. When a person is in peril their minds have a tendency to wander. In those last few hours I was down in the hole when I thought it was lights out, when all the pinecones and worms had been eaten, when all the water had been sucked from the soil and when all the stories had been told, I began to think about what it might feel like to sleep on a bed of cotton candy. I'm sure you have all thought about this, too, but when death is imminent, you would think I would have

been thinking about something more important, like all the people in my life who were going to miss me when I was gone. As the level of peril rose in Onus and Twig's situation, Onus thought, I wonder how much time Twig has left before he runs out of strength and energy and he falls over the edge?

"Time," he said out loud. "That's the answer." He loosened one of his numb, frozen arms from the pillow-sized ice shard that had kept him from sliding and he heaved it onto his pant pocket. As his arm flew through the air, thin flakes of ice broke from his skin and drifted away on the wind. The movement caused the blood in his arm to flow faster and within seconds the numbing subsided. He felt the outside of his pocket, then dug his hand deep into it. There at the very bottom of his pocket was the watch Fang had given him after the Arugula incident. It was a long shot to think a plastic watch could dig into the ice, but it was the only shot he could think of taking. He pulled the watch out of his pocket and with his teeth he tore the wristbands free from the watch's body. There, where the little pin held the wristbands in place was a sharp prong. He slammed the prong side of the watch into the icy ground and he let go of the shard of ice holding him in place.

The slope of the ice was far steeper than it had appeared and Onus slid down it fast. Before he could lose all control he flipped over onto his stomach and put all the weight of his body onto the watch. It dug deeper into the ice and made a sound like a television on full when the cable cuts out and only fuzzy snow fills the screen. "I'm coming, Twig," he yelled. "Hold on!"

He remembered the Karhuville Icerink his parents used to take him and Isis to when they were younger. The rink was much smoother and if you did happen to fall you weren't propelled toward huge cracks that opened up

onto personality-morphing sand. His favourite thing at the Karhuville Icerink was the Zamboni, the truck-like machine that drove over the ice every hour cleaning and smoothing its surface. The skating was always fun, but watching the Zamboni made the day. If he had a Zamboni right now, things would be different. Firstly, the ice he was sliding along would be much smoother and the possibility of being bumped and bruised up would almost disappear. And lastly, if he had a Zamboni, he could just hop onto it and ride it down the slope to Twig. Of course, who's to say a Zamboni can drive on sand. Even if they did have a Zamboni, would it really do them any good once they were off the ice? Onus thought it was funny how his mind was all over the place, but as he neared Twig his mind focused onto one thing, and one thing only...saving his friend.

The crack was so close. Twig was so close. Onus was slowing down, but not fast enough. And worst yet, he was heading straight for Twig. Instead of saving his friend, he was going to knock him over the edge and probably fall over the edge himself. He pushed down on the watch with every last bit of strength he had, but his slippery slide did not slow. "If you're holding onto something, Twig!" Onus yelled. "Hold on tighter. I'm coming straight for you!"

"I'm holding on with my dear life," Twig yelled, "and nothing else! Please don't run into me because I don't want to fall into The Sand."

"Hold on!" Onus yelled as he collided with Twig. The impact brought him to a complete stop, which was a good thing, but it sent Twig over the edge, which was a very bad thing. Twig reached out as he fell and grabbed Onus's foot, but like everything else around him, it was covered in a thin layer of ice and was extremely slippery. It slid through his hands like a firepole slides through a fireman's hands, but it gave Onus enough time to reach down and grab Twig's shirt

collar, the same collar that had been stretched and pulled several times over the past days. Twig's weight caused Onus's body to slide ever closer to the crack. "I've got you Twig," he said in a reassuring voice, that really didn't sound that reassuring.

"But I'm too heavy," Twig said. "You have to let me go or we'll both fall in."

"I got you into this, Twig. I'm not letting go of you."

"I was going to fall in anyway. You were just trying to help," Twig said. "If we both fall in, then there will be no hope of ever getting home. You have to let go of me and find a way off of this beach so you can call our parents and the police and the military and every superhero on the planet. They'll make everything better. I know they will. But if you don't call them, there's no hope."

"I'm not letting you go," Onus said and slipped a little closer to the edge.

"People have called me weird for years," Twig said. "If I fall in The Sand, it will make no difference."

"I'm not letting you go."

Two flickering beams of light shattered the darkness. Onus looked up and was momentarily blinded. An engine revved and the lights grew brighter.

"They're coming now," Twig said. "They're coming and they're going to push us both in. You have to let go of me and get out of here."

"I'm not..." Onus said, but before he could finish saying, "letting go," Twig's shirt collar made a horrible tearing sound and ripped away from the rest of his shirt.

Twig fell down onto The Sand and looked up at his friend. The headlights pointed at Onus's face made the tears falling from his eyes sparkle like electric ladybugs. "I'm so sorry," Onus said. "I failed you. I failed us. I'm the worst friend in the world."

The Healing Sand

"You're wrong," Twig said. "You are Onus Livesay and you are the best friend in the whole wide world. And I'm Twig Lohman. That's who I'll always be. Go! Get out of here and get help!"

Twig's body bobbed and bounced as the earth below him came to life. Then he was gone, swallowed up by The Healing Sand in one large gulp.

EIGHT

To say that life at the bottom of a deep dark hole is anything but pleasant would be a fair statement, but it is not totally accurate. Mr. Flex and I did everything we could do to keep our bodies healthy. As you all know, we ate horrible squishy and prickly things, we drank terrible tasting, dirty liquids and through the long long nights, I did jumping jacks (despite the bone I had broken). Yes, these jumping jacks were done out of the need to get the spiders off my face, but they were done nonetheless, and they helped keep my body healthy. Your doctor or your mother may have mentioned to you before that it is just as important, if not more, to keep your mind healthy. Mr. Flex and I kept our minds healthy by talking and telling stories. These stories were often filled with sadness and dire situations, and you are ever so correct to think that sadness is not a byproduct of a healthy mind. Neither is being stuck in a dire situation. So stories alone weren't going to keep our minds healthy. We had to infuse humour and happiness into our situation no matter how humourless and unhappy our situation was. To do this we took turns reciting limericks, and often, it was the recital of these limericks that brought a little pleasantness to our very unpleasant experience.

A limerick is a funny, often quite crude little poem made up of five lines. In a limerick, the first, second and fifth

lines all rhyme with one another, and the third and fourth lines rhyme together. This means it has a rhyme scheme of AABBA. If you have not learned about rhyme schemes yet, do not worry, it's coming, and just like being at the bottom of a deep dark hole, it is almost anything but pleasant.

Hole is a great word when you are nowhere near one. That is because so many things rhyme with the word hole. If you stop reading for a few seconds and just think about it I bet you can come up with at least five words that rhyme with hole.

Was I right?

Between Mr. Flex's stories and between our pursuits to keep our bodies healthy, we recited limericks, and if ever you find yourself in a situation as unpleasant as ours – a week long stay at your aunt's house, stuck at the highest point on a Ferris Wheel as two oily fellows try to get it moving again, on a catamaran blown out to sea, which is now being circled by hungry sharks – try doing the same. For a moment or two it will distract you from everything else that's going on.

There once were two strangers with different goals
Like getting rich and not falling into holes
Now they're living in the dark
Eating pinecones and bark
Those poor strangers are now a couple of moles
- Mr. Flex

I once had a most pleasant uncle named Sol
Who succumbed not to a swarm of bees or to a fall
No, the sun did him in
And as his only living kin
I thought I'd be entitled to it all.
- Christopher Millin

Three large vehicles that looked like bulldogs with wheels pulled up next to Fang and came to a stop. "Leave the lights on!" Fang yelled. All the doors on all the vehicles opened at once and a stream of men in overalls poured out and onto the sand. They hobbled over to Fang and looked out over the icy patch of beach.

"This is an odd sight," one of the men said as he tapped his shoe on the ice.

"Watch yourself," Fang said. "The hail has started up again and those stones are the largest I've ever seen and I've been in some doozy hailstorms in my time. If you step too far out onto that ice, one of those stones might fall on your foot, and a stone that size is bound to crush it, if not break it right off."

"Maybe we shouldn't be standing here," another man said.

"I've been here for several minutes," Fang said. "The hail is only falling on the ice patch. When it hits the ice and bounces it still doesn't come outside the circumference of the ice patch. We are fine here."

"This is indeed an odd sight," another man repeated.

"Hey boss," another man said. "We've been looking for you for hours. What are you doing way out here?"

Fang raised his arm. "I came here to fix this," he said. "I also needed a little time to figure out what to do next."

"That's good," one of the men said. "We're all getting a little bored sitting around waiting for instructions. Some of the men have even started writing biographies of their lives."

"Biographies? Ha!" Fang laughed. "What would a bunch of goons like you write about? I can just see it...The Life and Times of a Lackey."

"All I'm saying is that we're raring to go on a new plan," the same man said. "Is there a new plan?"

Fang's eyes followed the headlight beams into the hailstorm. "Oh yes," he said, "there is definitely a new plan and it may be my greatest plan ever."

"Plan C," one of the men bellowed.

"No!" Fang bellowed back. "This plan is far too devious to be designated 'Plan C'. This, my limping compadres, is the mother of all plans. This is Plan Double A."

Through pencil-thin cracks in the falling hail Onus glimpsed seven or eight people who had been turned into silhouettes by the beams of light blasting from behind them. One of the silhouettes was much larger than the others. Instinct kicked in inside Onus's brain and took on the persona of an old cockatoo Onus and Isis once had as a pet. The cockatoo's name was Patty and she could say three words and three words only. "Bingo. Ringo. Azerbaijan." No one knew where Patty learned these three words because no one in the Livesay house played bingo, had a friend named Ringo, or even knew what an Azerbaijan was. As Onus's instinct, Patty had the ability to speak as you or I would and what she said was not what Onus wanted to hear. "You have to get out of here Onus. You have to just turn the opposite way of those men and run...run...run. Azerbaijan!"

Patty's abilities weren't limited to an extended vocabulary. She could also send signals out to Onus's body that said, "This situation Onus is in is not safe. You have to overpower his heart and get him out of here. Ringo!"

"Quit trying to control me," Onus said out loud. "I have to save Twig. I have to stay."

"And do what?" Patty asked. "Jump in there and pull him out?"

"Maybe if I'm quick enough, The Sand won't make me weird."

"The best thing you can do for Twig is leave and find help elsewhere," Patty said. "Twig said so himself. Bingo."

"I can't leave him. I promised," Onus cried. "I've already broken that promise once today. I can't break it again."

"If you hadn't broken that promise earlier, Twig would have...died," Patty whispered the word 'died' just as Onus would have. "We simply can not hold on to our promises if it puts someone's life in danger and that is exactly what is happening here and now. Your life is in danger and so is Twig's. You must break your promise. You must."

It was odd that Onus's instinct looked like Patty the cockatoo. He hadn't thought about that silly bird in years. A glimpse of her makeshift grave in the Livesay backyard appeared in his mind. He suddenly felt guilty because it had been so long since he last visited it. For several months after Patty had passed away he was scared of the little mound of dirt under the maple tree. He had never experienced death before and the mound was a firm reminder of the finality of it. He wept for weeks when he realized she wasn't coming back. "She has gone to a better place," his mother said trying to comfort him, but it was of no use. How, he thought, could under the ground be a better place than the birdcage in his bedroom? How, he thought, could there be anything that feels worse than this? A couple of years later Onus came to realize that something could make him feel worse. Much worse.

The pencil-thin cracks in the falling hail grew to ruler-thin cracks, then to baseball-bat thin cracks. "Isis said the hail would only fall for a half hour," Patty reminded Onus. "I think that half hour is coming to an end."

Onus looked out and saw the darkened people step onto the icy surface. They all jumped back as the last few basketball-sized hail stones fell where they had stepped. He looked behind him and saw Evan deflecting a few more of the

large hail stones. The weird doctor noticed that Onus hadn't fallen into The Sand. "Destroy the children!" he roared.

"I don't know what to do," Onus said. "I always seem to fail those I care for. I failed you. I failed Isis and now I've failed Twig. Maybe I should just give in and let The Sand take me."

"Listen to your instinct," Patty said and flew away into the darkness of his cerebellum.

An object in the shape of an umbrella popped open above one of the darkened people. The person stepped onto the ice. Onus could see the shrinking hail stones bouncing off the umbrella-like object. The darkened person gave the other people a darkened thumbs up. All of them, except the much larger one, filed onto the ice and huddled under the umbrella-like object. They no longer looked like people. They no longer looked human. As they shuffled toward Onus, the silhouette of the seven or eight people under the umbrella-like object looked more like a huge, hideous blob creature that was devouring everything in its path.

Ten-year-old boys beware!

Evan took a large step and then another. The blob and the weird doctor had the same destination in mind. It was as obvious as a pylon on freshly fallen snow. Destination: Onus Livesay! Onus looked from one to the other. Had he listened to Patty right away he could have avoided the dilemma. If only Patty had showed up that fateful day he and Twig ate the tomato soup, they could have avoided everything that had happened and was going to happen to them. But if he wasn't going to listen to Patty now when his life was in a most dire situation, who's to say he would have listened to Patty then? He looked into The Sand and noticed movement. Twig's greasy hair. His forehead. His friend was rising.

A few more seconds and I can grab him, Onus thought. But a few more seconds were going to be hard to find. The

blob of people was so close Onus could make out distinct features, like crooked noses, missing teeth and limps. One of the men in the blob pointed and yelled, "That's the kid who ruined everything. Let's get him and dump him in The Sand and then dump him in again when he comes out."

"Destroy the children!" Evan roared again. He was now only a few feet from Onus. Onus closed his eyes. He didn't listen to his instinct and now he was going to suffer the consequences.

"I am Onus Livesay," he said. "I am Onus Livesay."

Would the blob of lackeys reach him first or would Evan be victorious? Onus braced for the impact of one or the other and when it hit, he was surprised by how odd it felt. He was in the air, but he was not flying wildly out of control toward The Healing Sand. He opened his eyes and saw a spindly arm wrapped around his waste. He was being carried away. Away from The Healing Sand. Away from the blob of (now confused-looking) lackeys. Away from Evan the weird doctor. Away from the strange looking ten-year-old boy that was once Twig Lohman.

"Yeehaw!"

Onus looked up as best he could and even in the dark recognized the person holding him. It was Ignatious Crow, the previously broken man whose head was also previously buried in the sand.

"They didn't even see it coming!" he shouted. "Woohoo! Casper would be so impressed with my bravado!"

"We have to go back and save Twig," Onus shouted. "They're going to make him do horrible things like bathe in sawdust and eat eggplant. I just know it."

"That's out of the question, partner," Ignatious said. "First we're going to get as far away from this beach as we can and then we're going to find something to eat and then we're going to figure out how to get your friend back using

a well thought-out plan, a rope and a series of detailed diagrams."

"If we don't go back now, we're going to lose him. I just know it," Onus said, but he said this so quietly that all Ignatious heard was 'I know.'

"That's good on you, partner," Ignatious said. "Detailed diagrams help out in even the most complicated and dangerous situation. I tell you, I sure wish I had taken the time to sit back and draw up some detailed diagrams before I set out to find out what made those ditches. I'm quite sure none of us would be where we are now if only I had done that."

Onus dropped his head and let Ignatious carry him away. It wasn't very smart turning around and attempting to rescue Twig with Evan and the blob of lackeys standing there waiting. To argue that it was a good idea was preposterous. As Onus bobbed up and down with the movement of Ignatious's running, a series of images shook loose from his brain and plopped down into his consciousness. A battalion of two-seater biplanes did barrel rolls behind his eyes. Men wearing dark overcoats and fedora hats hid behind turned over tables next to his eardrums. Three women tossed unidentifiable items into a small car-sized steaming pot that was placed on top of a pile of burning logs near the back of his head. It was an odd time for such random images to appear in his head, but as I have said in the past, when we are in difficult situations, our minds start to wander.

Flecks of quartz in the sand caught a bit of moonlight and twinkled. Because the twinkling was all Onus could see, it felt like they were running on the stars. Only the sound of Ignatious's laboured breathing reminded Onus that he wasn't in a dream.

The twinkling sand gave way to the black hole that was parking lot asphalt. But a sun must have been rising

somewhere in the east, because Onus could suddenly see the white lines that clearly marked each parking spot. He looked up and could see the hair growing on the back of Ignatious's neck. He looked down at his shoe and saw a tear in the toe. Where was this light coming from? Morning was still several hours away.

For anyone who has ever witnessed a sunrise, you will agree it is a most beautiful experience, equal only to the experience of squishing together a fire-toasted smore or picking out the lint from your belly button. Part of the beauty of a sunrise is its revealing nature. The world is hidden at night and so too are the things that make our world special, like trees and lakes and mountains with faces carved into them. They're still there at night, but when one cannot see them one cannot truly appreciate them. Unfortunately, it wasn't a sunrise lighting up the area around Onus and Ignatious, because soon after Onus saw the tear in his shoe an ugly truth was revealed...it was a truth that probably would have been best left in the dark.

Three vehicles that looked like bulldogs with wheels were speeding toward them. The beams shooting out of their headlights were all targeted on the same thing: Onus and Ignatious. "You have to run faster!" Onus yelled. "They're coming!"

Ignatious turned to look at the approaching pack. "Well now, this isn't a promising situation," he said.

The frenzied sound of their growling engines tore through the relaxed oceanside sounds (the lapping water, the snoring seagulls, the gentle breeze whistling, Ignatious's laboured breathing) that filled the background only moments earlier. The beasts sounded hungry. They sounded intent on destruction.

"Faster!" Onus yelled.

Ignatious jumped a bush along the edge of the parking

lot and came to a stop. "As strong as I feel right now," he said, "I can only run so fast with a one-hundred pound boy in my arms."

"Last time I weighed myself I was one hundred and four pounds," Onus said. "If that's too heavy for you, put me down. I can run just as fast on my own. I was the fifty-metre sprint champion at last year's sports day and I've run away from several of the neighbours' dogs when they've gotten loose."

"But your just a..." Ignatious was about to say, "But you're just a kid and kids can't run nearly as fast as adults and it is an adult's responsibility to protect kids," but he had come to realize that Onus (and Twig) weren't your everyday average kids. In the little time he had known them he had seen the two boys display bravery, determination and loyalty that even the most-noted cowboy hero would be impressed by. If anyone could take care of himself, it was Onus and the past events had proven to Ignatious that it was hard to deny this fact. "But you're right," Ignatious said instead. "If we're going to get out of this you're going to have to run as well."

He loosened his grip around Onus's waist and gently placed him down on his feet. As if their minds were connected by invisible wire, they sprinted side-by-side into a dark alley that ran like a vein through a strange town neither of them had ever been to. When they shook the headlights, the town took on a sinister hue. Garbage cans lined up in front of garage doors looked like stubby fingers on hands waiting to reach out and grab passers-by. Back doors looked like sunken in and swollen eyes caused by the fatigue of constant watch; what they were watching for was anyone's guess. Onus tried to keep his eyes forward. But it was hard not to look over at a long, pointy blotch with a tail that had run out from a sewer grate and darted along beside them. It was hard not to look up and try to make out the

creatures perched on the edge of several buildings. The dark became a cruel place for Onus when Isis went to the place where people go when they turn purple. Like a magician with a twisted wit, it conjured up plenty of false hope and expectation. Onus thought back to that very first night he was alone in his room. There was a bundle of his clothes lying on a chair in the corner of the room. Several times that night he swore the bundle of clothes was his sister. He swore she was sitting there watching him sleep. And every time this happened, his heart began to race and he began to think the whole meatball incident had been a horrible nightmare. A flick of the bedside lamp proved otherwise. The letdown was almost a worse feeling than the loss. For almost a year afterward Onus slept with a nightlight so the dark wouldn't get the better of him. But here he was again, in the dark, as he had been so many times before since crossing Fang. Was it payback for neglecting it for so very long? Was it simply logic, because most bad things happen in the dark?

"Keep up, partner," Ignatious whispered. "It is mighty spooky back here. I sure wouldn't want to lose you. As brave as I made myself out to be back there, I'm not going to lie to you; I slept with a nightlight for years because I was afraid of the dark. When I became a cowboy I always had Casper by my side to protect me from anything that might want to do me harm."

Onus smiled. He had never told anyone about sleeping with a nightlight. He was embarrassed by it. It was plenty brave of Ignatious to admit he did the same thing at a much older age and that made Onus feel much better. But that feeling soon disappeared as the growling sound of animals on the hunt tore through the night. The headlights were on Onus and Ignatious again, and now they were trapped. The dark had played its cruelest trick yet, hiding the brick wall that blocked off the end of the alley. The vehicles that looked

like bulldogs appeared and lined up side-by-side blocking the other end of the alley. The light shooting from their eyes was blinding. Slowly they crept toward their prey. Liquid dripped from their exhaust pipes like saliva from mouths. They were hungry and angry, a bad combination in any situation. Onus looked up at Ignatious and saw only one thing: terror. If ever there was a moment he could use a hand from Isis it was then. He looked up and shouted, "Help! Please help me Isis! I'm about to be dog food and I don't like that idea one bit!"

The engines revved and all three vehicles that looked like bulldogs pounced.

NINE

'A deer in headlights' is an odd expression you may have heard that describes a person or thing so stunned by what they are looking at they literally become paralyzed in their tracks. You could say that when the vehicles that looked like bulldogs began to speed toward Ignatious and Onus, the man and the child looked exactly like a couple of deer in headlights, minus the fur, the tails and the hooves. Their eyes were wide-open and their mouths were in the shape of jelly-filled donuts. Their legs trembled, and at least in Onus's case, sweat trickled down the back of his ears. In a feeble effort to protect himself, Onus held his hands out in front of him with his palms turned outwards. He hoped by some slim chance this gesture would hold the beasts back. But stopping did not seem to be a part of their mission. The sad truth was the vehicles would most likely run into the wall at full speed and squish him and Ignatious. Onus looked up at the sky and thought one last thought. At least I will be with you again. And as Onus came to accept his fate, a star fell before his eyes. And then another star fell. Onus smiled thinking it was Isis celebrating their impending reunion. But then another star fell and this one landed on Onus's arm. It let off a pulse of light and fizzed out leaving a spot of black and a pinch of pain in its place. "Ouch," Onus said and rubbed the spot on his arm where the star had burned out.

"Psst! Over here!"

A fountain of stars suddenly lit up a dark corner of the alley, but they weren't stars at all. No, they were sparks and they were firing out of the mouth of something shaped like a robot. A very small robot. "Quickly!" a voice behind the spark-shooting robot thing said. A door swung open revealing a dimly lit hallway and a very rotund and familiar person. "Follow me or become pancakes. There's only one real choice here."

The familiar person was right. There was only one choice. As delicious as pancakes are, especially when topped with butter and maple syrup, Onus was pretty sure he didn't want to become one. He leaped from the wall and into the hallway. Ignatious followed close behind and just in time. As they slammed the door shut and locked the three deadbolts, the ground rumbled below them. Tires screeched and wailed as the three vehicles that looked like bulldogs came to a fast and full stop. As big and powerful as the beasts were, hitting a wall at such speeds would still destroy them. Had Onus and Ignatious been against the wall, this destruction would have been justified and even celebrated. But the intended targets were gone. To the lackeys in the bellies of the beasts, the boy and the cowboy appeared to disappear and in doing so they took with them the whole reason to cause such destruction in the first place. I am quite sure a few of those lackeys would have loved to drive into the wall despite the fact there was no one there to squish, but I am also quite sure Fang was the registered owner of the vehicles that resembled bulldogs. Can you imagine trying to explain to William Ernest Fang why you crashed his vehicle for no apparent reason? Of course, crashing a vehicle to squish a bothersome child isn't really a good reason either, but in a villain's world, it's reason enough.

"Well, aren't you lucky I happened to be throwing out my garbage," the round man said and turned around. It was Dudley, the man from the beach. In his hand was a toy robot. "Had I stopped to dust my toys before coming out, the two of you would be a whole lot less alive than you are right now."

"We can't thank you enough, partner," Ignatious said.

Outside, when the lackeys realized Onus and Ignatious hadn't disappeared into thin air, they began pounding on the door with an intensity better suited for a boxing ring. Their loud bangs echoed up and down the hallway. "Can they get in here?" Onus asked.

"That door is made of steel," Dudley said. "The only thing getting in here is the air coming through the keyholes."

The bangs got louder. "It sounds like they're ramming the door with something," Ignatious said. "You don't think they'll drive those vehicles through the door, do you?"

Dudley rubbed his chin and said, "Now that's something I didn't quite think about. Perhaps we should get out of here a little faster. My apartment is at the end of the hallway. We can hide in there. They'd have to drive through everyone's wall to find us and I don't think they're going to do that."

Onus wanted to tell Dudley that the lackeys beating against the alley door would indeed do that...in fact, they'd probably do just about anything to find Onus after the trouble he had caused them. But before Onus could open his mouth, Dudley was speeding down the hallway away from him. Onus and Ignatious caught up to the round man and followed him into his apartment, which also happened to be dimly lit.

Dudley slammed his front door shut once they were all inside and proceeded to lock fourteen deadbolts, chainlocks and padlocks attached to the door. "One can never be too safe, I always say," Dudley said as he turned the last deadbolt.

Onus noticed Dudley's door was made of wood and was quite sure that even if there were a hundred locks on it, someone with an ax or chainsaw or strong will would surely be able to break through it.

"Perhaps we should hide behind my big sofa until we know it's absolutely, positively safe to come out," Dudley said.

"I think that's a swell idea," Ignatious said.

Dudley, Ignatious and Onus ducked behind the sofa and waited. They listened for approaching destruction and heard nothing. After ten minutes they looked at one another and each shrugged their shoulders. After ten more minutes Dudley spoke. "I knew they couldn't get through that door. I'm not going to lie to you, though. I was a little scared out there. I mean, after that whole episode on the beach with that horrible man, I wasn't sure if my heart could take any more fear. When I first saw the two of you against the wall, well, I turned right around and I headed back in. There was no way I was going to get into another scuffle. There was no way I was going to break another of my robots. But as I was walking away, a voice in my head said 'Dudley, you're better than this.' I thought about what X-C91 would have done in my place and instantly, it became clear. I had to help you no matter what the consequence."

"Who is X-C91?" Onus said.

"Who is X-C91?" Dudley repeated, his words carrying an astonished tone. "That's like asking who is Santa Claus. If I weren't still so shaken up over the events of this evening I'd probably be a little offended by such a question."

"I'm sorry, sir," Onus said. "I really don't mean to offend you. I just..."

"X-C91," Ignatious said, cutting off Onus at just the right time. "Isn't he the robot from that old television show *Moonmen*?"

"Ding! Ding! Ding!" Dudley said. "We have a winner. Give the man a boat and a trip to paradise. He's hit it on the nose. Little boy, X-C91, or X-See, as he was more affectionately known, was the greatest robot to ever appear on television. *Moonmen*, which starred Dack Bradley as Zip Coolidge and Corrine May as Fanny Banks, ran for an astonishing eleven years during the fifties and sixties. X-C91 got Zip and Fanny out of hundreds of bad situations, just like I got you out of that bad situation back there. X-C91 was also the model for the first real-life robot ever to be built."

Dudley stood up and flipped on an overhead light. Onus couldn't believe his eyes. Against the walls of Dudley's tiny apartment were a dozen or more glass cases...just like the ones in Fang's leg museum. Fortunately, legs were not on display in these cases. "These are my babies," Dudley said. "Feel free to take a look, but please do not touch what's inside the cases or the cases themselves. The hardest thing to get off of glass is a greasy finger print and nothing is greasier than a little boy."

Onus was too excited about what was in the cases to take any offence to Dudley's remark. Momentarily forgetting everything going on in his life: trying to get home, The Healing Sand, Twig's weird condition, the vehicular beasts a short distance away; Onus walked over to the nearest case and stared at the magical items within it. He reached out to touch the glass, but Dudley was quick to say, "Ah ah ah! Fingerprints."

Each case was filled with six or more toy robots. Some were made out of wood, while others were made out of tin. Some were box shaped while others were round like bowling pins. Each robot was exquisitely and impressively hand painted. Dudley stepped up next to Onus and pointed to a robot alone on the top shelf of the case Onus had been

looking at. A little velvet rope had been set up around the robot. "That is the diamond in my collection of jewels," he said quite proudly. "That is the prototype for X-C91. It's 1/25th scale with a working sparking mechanism in its mouth. How cool is that? I got him from a collector in Arugula. Can you believe my luck? It was well worth the five-hour drive there, that's for sure. The robot is in mint condition...more than fifty years old and not a scratch or a dent on it."

As hard as it is to believe, there are things out there that have an even more powerful effect on a ten-year-old boy than dozens and dozens of toy robots. Okay, maybe I am exaggerating a little when I say that. Let me rephrase what I just wrote. Even though Onus was captivated by Dudley's collection of robots, something Dudley had said had become even more important and he wasn't going to let it slide by like he had let the phone in Evan's office slide by. Onus tore his eyes away from the robots and looked up at Dudley. "Did you say you were in Arugula?"

"Kind of a creepy place," Dudley said. "I got X-See and I got out of there as fast as I could."

"How far did you say it was from here?"

"Why are you so interested in a place named after a bitter-tasting lettuce?" Dudley asked. "You should be interested in my robots. You see that one on the third shelf? He's one of the rarest shape-changing robots on the planet. Only three were ever made. His other shape is a coffee vending machine. Hmm...I guess in retrospect, a coffee-vending machine isn't very exciting."

"Your robots are wonderful, sir," Onus said. "If I was here for a visit I would stay for hours and hours looking at them and talking to you about them...I really love robots. But I am trying to find out how to make my friend not weird anymore and I am trying to get home and home is only forty-five

minutes away from Arugula. You said Arugula was a five-hour drive from here, which means, by car, I am less than six hours away from home."

"Well shoot," Ignatious said. "That really isn't that far. Maybe Dudley here will drive you home."

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Back that horse up friend," Dudley said. "I'm a busy man with plenty of important things to do. I can't just step away for a day to deliver a couple of kids back to their mommies."

"It's okay, sir," Onus said. "I never expected you to drive me home. But perhaps I could use your phone. I could call my parents and they could come and pick me up."

"My sweet, naïve little child," Dudley said in a singsong voice. "That would be a long- distance phone call. Do you know how much money that would cost me? I'm sorry, I just can't let you do that on my dime."

"Well hold on there, partner," Ignatious said angrily and moved within inches of Dudley's face. "I can understand you not wanting to drive the boy home and the inconvenience it may cause you, but surely you can lend him your phone."

Dudley backed up and bumped into one of his glass cases knocking down two of his robots. "I...I...I'm saving up for a new robot," he said. "It's the Bowman-Zenog 68d, a life-size, fully-functional helper robot that can cook, clean and dust. It's...It's a lot of money and I'm so close. I just can't afford any extra expenditures."

Ignatious's face turned red and for a moment Onus thought he saw a puff of smoke shoot from the man's ears. "You are the most selfish, self-indulgent man I have ever met," Ignatious said. "This boy and his friend have been wandering alone for who knows how long. They just want to go home. A simple phone call could help them do that and you won't give them that. If I wasn't so tired and hungry, well, I do believe I'd slap you."

"I saved your lives," Dudley said. "And this is how you repay me? With threats."

"Yes, but you saved us to make yourself feel better," Ignatious pointed out. "Our well being played a tiny role in your decision. You are a bad person and I do not associate with bad people. We should leave right now, Onus. I'm sure there is a nice person out there who will help us."

"I'm not a bad person," Dudley protested. "I'm just a guy who likes robots and staying out of trouble. What's so bad about that?"

"You're really no different than that awful Fang out there on the beach," Ignatious said. "Except for the fact that he knows he's a bad person and he embraces it. You hide behind excuses and attitude."

"I'm nothing like that...that man," Dudley said. "To prove it, I will let the boy use the phone. But only for two minutes. See, I can be good. I really can."

Onus smiled. He looked around Dudley's apartment for the phone. A pang of excitement welled in his stomach. The journey was so close to being over. Once his parents were with him, he could go get Twig and they could return home and find a doctor who could give Twig some pills or an injection or an exercise regime that would reverse his weird state. The phone was up on a wall next to one of Dudley's glass cases. Onus ran to it and plucked it from its receiver.

"Two minutes," Dudley said firmly.

Onus dialed three of the numbers in his phone number and the line went dead. "Sir, your phone doesn't seem to be working."

"My phone works just fine," Dudley said. "I used it only moments before I saved you to call a few of the locals. No one was home, but I was still able to leave messages."

Onus pushed the next number in his phone number, but there was no beep or boop or any such sound to let him

know the number had been processed. "Maybe the battery is dead," he said.

"Well that would make sense," Dudley said. "Some of the messages I left were quite long."

"So you only have the one phone?" Ignatious asked.

"Of course I only have the one phone," Dudley replied. "I'm not a millionaire. It only takes a few minutes to recharge. Just put it back on the receiver and we'll wait. I can show you a few more of my robots in the meantime."

While Dudley spoke, a strange thing happened. The robots on the glass shelves in the glass cases began to dance. If you looked at it another way, you could also say they began to shake. A couple of them fell over.

"Did you feel that?" Ignatious said.

"It must have been a little earthquake," Dudley said. "But that's odd, because we haven't had an earthquake around here for almost a hundred years."

The hardwood floor beneath them began to vibrate and all the robots suddenly tumbled over. "My robots!" Dudley cried. "What's going on here?"

From the hallway, a terrible grinding, crunching, grumbling noise arose. Dudley ran to the door while trying to maintain his balance on a floor that was now rolling like an unsettled ocean. He peeked through the peephole and saw several old women and men in their flannel pajamas hobbling down the hallway at a startling pace. Then a young man holding a cat whizzed by. Then a young woman carrying a young man carrying a cat whizzed by. Dudley opened the door a crack and peered down the hallway in the direction from which they had come.

What he saw was unbelievable. What he saw was indescribable. But I will try. One of the vehicles that looked like a bulldog was slowly forcing its way down the hallway. A plow attached to the front of it tore into the walls as easily as

a warm spoon tears into soft ice cream. Glass shattered and load-bearing planks snapped. Lighting fixtures, sprinklers and gypsum rained down on the vehicle's roof. The hallway caved in and collapsed behind the vehicle. Dudley watched the plow hook onto a phonograph player that had been against the inside of one of the apartment walls. The phonograph player played the most delightful music as the vehicle drove overtop of it and crushed it under its massive weight. When the music died out, the sound of the destruction became deafening. Dudley slammed his door shut.

"It appears we have a problem," he said quite calmly, considering what was going on right outside his door.

"It's Fang, isn't it?" Onus said and dropped the phone.

"He's mad!" Dudley shouted. "And he's going to destroy everything in my life that is dear to me. It's just not fair. If only I had..."

"Let them squish us?" Ignatious said, finishing Dudley's sentence for him.

Dudley's face went red, not from anger, but from embarrassment and guilt. "I wasn't going to say that," he said unconvincingly.

"These toys of yours," Ignatious said, "they're just things. They can all be replaced. What can't be replaced is human life. What should be most dear to you is not what's in your life, but life itself. My life. Onus's life. Your life. If you don't start thinking about that, your robots won't be the only things that are destroyed."

Dudley pulled on the skin under his chin. He looked around his apartment at the collection he had amassed over the years. "But they're not just things to me," he said. "They are everything to me. I will not leave them."

A wall at the far corner of Dudley's apartment exploded. Two glass cases closest to the wall shattered and the robots

on display inside of them tumbled to the floor. A robot arm broke off one of the robots and hit a window across the room, causing it to crack. Dudley pointed at the cracked window. "Go through there," he yelled. "When you're on the street, go north for three blocks and turn left. Follow the road for about five minutes and look for a large wrought iron gate that seems completely out of place. Behind the gate...that's where you'll find all the answers. I'm sure of it."

"What's behind the gate?" Onus asked.

Dudley's door crumpled. A lackey with binoculars spotted the three and jumped off the back of the vehicle that was forcing its way down the hall. "You have to get out of here now!" Dudley yelled.

"What about you?" Ignatious yelled back. "They're going to hurt you. You have to come with us."

"I'm not leaving my robots!" he proclaimed. "Now go!"

Onus tugged on Ignatious's sleeve. "We have to go."

The lackey rushed toward them. "Give us the boy!" he shrieked.

Dudley's arm shot out and caught the lackey like a toad's tongue catches a fly. "Well look at that," he said. "Now I'm just like X-See helping the good guys out of a bad situation."

Onus and Ignatious knew this was their chance to escape. Another wall exploded and the force of it caused the cracked window to shatter. Onus smiled at Dudley, then sprinted to the opening. He and Ignatious carefully slipped through it and out onto the darkened street. The apartment building began to hula...and one thing a building should never do is hula. Only people and trained squirrels in grass skirts should hula and Ignatious knew this. He lifted Onus off the ground and ran as fast as he could. The building made a low groaning sound, like it was accepting its fate and exhaling its last breath. Sparks and fire shot out of blown-out windows. Rats appeared out of drainpipes and basement windows,

and ran like gray water under garbage bins. A side of the building suddenly collapsed, sending a plume of dust high into the air.

"Close your eyes!" Ignatious yelled. "You don't need to see this." But it was too late. Onus watched as the other side of the building collapsed and all the cement and wood and novelty spoon collections that made up the apartment building fell to the ground hard.

Metal twisted. Brick crumbled. More glass shattered.

Ignatious picked up his pace. He wasn't about to let a wave of debris wash over him. As he put some distance between the two of them and the collapsing apartment building, an eerie quietness fell over the land. Only the sound of his feet hitting the ground could be heard. Despite the distance Ignatious put between them and the collapsing building, Onus couldn't get the image of it out of his mind. A collapsing building is a most terrifying sight (and the possibility of people still in the collapsing building is a most terrifying thought), and he hoped never to have to see it (or think about it) again. It was an even more terrifying sight than Fang's leg museum, and that's saying a lot, because a leg museum can be a pretty terrifying place.

"Do you think Dudley's okay?" Onus asked.

Ignatious did not answer. He just kept running. Dudley had said to head north, so that's where he headed. Dudley had said to turn left after three blocks, so that's where he turned. Dudley had said to head up the road for five minutes, but this must have meant at a walking pace, because after only two minutes of running, a large, misshapen wrought iron gate appeared, and that's where Ignatious came to a stop.

The gate creaked as a weak wind pushed it back and forth on rusty hinges. A shattered padlock lay on the ground next to it. Only darkness lay beyond it. Ignatious placed

Onus on his feet and sat down on the curb. His breath was laboured. A dim streetlight made the sweat pouring from his face look like twinkling diamonds. A diamond twinkled in his eye. "Let's hope Dudley made it out," Ignatious said between heavy breaths. "He's a good man...he hasn't had the time to see that yet."

Onus kicked a rock, which pinged off the wrought iron gate. "Dudley said we would find all our answers behind this gate. The important thing is for us to keep going...for Dudley. For Twig." He looked past the gate and said, "All I see is out there is the dark. I've tried to find things in the dark before, and it's not an easy thing to do. We'll need a light of some sort if we're going in there."

"Give me a couple more minutes of rest, partner," Ignatious said. "Those last few experiences drained me dry."

Onus took a seat next to Ignatious on the curb. He wanted so badly to get a move on, but he knew Ignatious was right. They had to rest. They had to build their energy back up. If he had learned anything from the prior day, it was that anything could happen at anytime. They had to be ready for that moment. He looked up and down the road, only seeing to the edge of the light cast from the dim lamppost. We've been through so much today, he thought. What else could possibly happen to us?

And as the thought disintegrated into the jumble of other thoughts spinning around his head, a spot of light appeared far off down the road. Onus jumped up. "Look. Look," he said and pointed. "Someone's coming."

This realization was like a new set of batteries, instantly re-energizing Ignatious. The cowboy sprang to his feet. "It never ends, does it?" he said. "We have to hide now. We have to hide somewhere behind the gate. It's our only option."

Whoever had the light must have noticed Ignatious and Onus, because the light began to swing erratically, as if the

person holding it was running. Ignatious placed his hands on two of wrought iron gate's bars and he pushed it wide open. It screamed like it was in pain. "Look for a tree, or something to hide behind and be quiet," Ignatious said and disappeared through the gate.

"Don't leave me, Ignatious," Onus said.

"Just find a hiding spot and be quiet," Ignatious said from somewhere in the dark. "When everything is safe, I'll call for you."

Onus stepped through the open gate and ran, but as you and I both know, running in the dark is about as safe as running with scissors. Danger is inherent when one chooses to do such a thing. Something, most likely a branch or a bony arm sticking up out of the ground, tripped Onus up. He fell hard. The area outside of the gate suddenly got brighter. Onus heard heavy breathing and footsteps. Pain lit up in his body just as the gate lit up. At that moment, a most defeating thought entered his head. It may never be safe for me ever again.

TEN

If you can believe it, there are places in this world that are prone to having earthquakes. And lots of them. Most of these quakes aren't even felt, but that doesn't mean the people who live in these places aren't constantly preparing for The Big One. News shows have hour-long programs dedicated to surviving The Big One and schools hold earthquake drills to prepare students should The Big One hit during a math test or spelling bee. The first thing one learns to do when The Big One hits is to duck and cover. This means to get underneath something stable like a desk or table and to cover your head and neck should debris start to fall down upon you.

Onus didn't need shaking ground and dancing buildings to tell him an earthquake (of sorts) was heading his way. Instinct, and the voice of his grade three teacher Miss Henry, told him that the safest thing for him to do was to duck and cover. He fought through the pain gushing through him and he got up on his knees. He couldn't see his knees, but by the way they burned and made a squishy sound, he knew the fall had cut him up pretty bad. There were no tables or desks around, so he ducked down in the place where he had fallen and covered his head and neck with his arms. He may not have actually been any safer, but he felt safer...and that went a long way in such a dire situation.

"Don't be afraid," Onus heard through panting breaths high up above him. "It's just me...Dudley."

The voice was Dudley's, but Onus had seen enough ventriloquist acts and impressionists to know anyone could be above him trying to trick him into letting down his guard. "If it's really you, Dudley, prove it," Onus said.

There was a brief moment of silence. In that moment Onus could hear wind rustling through tree branches. He could hear the wrought-iron gate squeaking like a mouse. Or maybe it was a mouse he heard. He could hear drops of water pitter pattering against the ground. It was a strange thing to hear considering it wasn't raining. "They're all gone," the voice above him said. "My robots...my life's passion. Gone. And you know what? I don't even care anymore. I cared so much about those silly robots, I forgot to care about anything else. I turned my back on people and I became something I had never been before. I became a jerk. The only jerk in my life should be the jerk chicken I eat every Tuesday night. Tonight, I saw the true face of evil and I had an epiphany. Do you know what an epiphany is?"

Onus uncovered his head and looked up into Dudley's soggy eyes. He sighed at the sight of the round man and shook his head. "It is a profound moment of sudden insight," Dudley said. "An insight into life. I realized all I've been doing all of my life is helping myself and that it was time to start helping others unconditionally. You seem to be caught up in something terrible and I am here to help you out of that mess. I am here, because I want to be here. Will you let me help you put that evil man and his terrible monkey in their rightful place?"

Ignatious appeared from behind Dudley. He patted the round man on the shoulder and smiled. "Well partner," he said, "I can't speak for my friend down there, but I can honestly say I'm happy you're here."

Onus stood up ignoring the bolts of pain shooting from his knees inward. "Me, too," he said. "Despite the way you acted toward us, I just knew you were on our side."

Dudley smiled. The little bit of light coming from his lamp reflected in his eyes. It looked like sparks. Sparks start fires, and Onus could tell a fire was starting. He hoped the fire would be big enough and powerful enough to destroy all the bad that was going on around him. "So what now?" he said.

Dudley lifted his lamp, lighting up the gravel road they were standing on. "This winding road runs for about a kilometre. At the end of it is a big, stone building that kind of looks like a castle. But it's the furthest thing from a castle. It is the place the weird people go to be hidden from the world. It is our town's dirty little secret. We all know about it, but we never talk about it. Kind of like the aligator in the attic. There...but not there."

"There...but not there," Onus repeated. "Like Twig. Like Evan the doctor."

"Yes," Dudley said. "Just like that."

"Will they be there?" Onus asked.

"If they're not with that terrible man, then they'll be there," Dudley said. "And if they're not there, maybe we'll find something there that will help them. I've heard rumours about a group of doctors there working on a cure for the weirdness. Of course, they're just rumours."

"Sounds like this is our only option," Ignatious said. "Let's saddle up and move out. Heeyaww!"

Dudley and Onus passed an unsure glance. "Heeyaww," Dudley said and shrugged his shoulders.

Onus shrugged his shoulders back at Dudley and yelled out at the top of his lungs, "Heeyawwwww!" His battlecry echoed down the dark, winding road. It sounded like several Onuses, who were all hiding in the woods alongside the

road, were joining in, assuring Onus he wouldn't be alone in his battle. Dudley handed Onus the lamp and nodded at the dark ahead of them. Onus lifted the lamp up in front of him and reluctantly lead his brigade of three into the unknown.

"Know this," Dudley said several minutes into their march. Onus stopped and shone the lamp up at the round man, eerily lighting his round face from beneath. "You may never again be the same after stepping into the Aylum of the Weird. From the few non-weird locals who have actually seen inside, The Asylum of the Weird has been described as the place of nightmares. Haunting and unforgettable. I only tell you this, so you can mentally prepare yourself."

Whenever we are facing a tough task, like a math test or the last level in *The Pirate Versus The Alien* or explaining the broken window in the basement, we have to mentally prepare ourselves for this task before hand. Mental preparation involves working through strategies and consequences in our minds. It involves study and repetition. For only if we prepare for something beforehand can we tackle it head on, without regret and without hesitation. For a math test, one might memorize the times tables and repeat them over and over again. For the last level in *The Pirate Versus The Alien*, one might draw on past levels and what worked in those to get them to the end. For a broken window, one might concoct a story about a werewolf battle, where the window may have broken, but the family was still safe. When I was down in the hole for several days I had to mentally prepare myself for the possibility that I may not get out...that I may slip away down there and become the bug meal Mr. Flex had been rambling on about for days. The first thing I did was come to terms with the unresolved issues in my life. I let go of the notion that Sparks the Cat was to blame for everything (because it was just silly thinking a cat could be so conniving,

right?), I forgave my parents for never letting me get a dirt bike (because dirt bikes and teenagers shouldn't mix, right?) and I admitted that I wasn't as good a writer as I thought I was (because I didn't learn the craft as well as I could / should have). After coming to terms with these things, I concluded that I really did live a good life up until that point and I was happy with how I chose to live it. I had great friends and family and I got to spend quality time with each and every one of them. After that, I pondered life as a whole and what our purpose...nay, my purpose in that life was. Whether it was to be there for Uncle Sol, or to listen to Mr. Flex's stories, my every minute had a purpose (even the ones where I was just sitting there staring out into space) and it felt good realizing that. And after all that, came acceptance. I had accepted that my life may end down in that hole and I was fine with that. I had lived a good life, and realizing that removed all the doubt and all the fear from my mind. I was mentally prepared for what would come next.

What comes next isn't what you might be expecting. What comes next is a strange side story about The Asylum of the Weird. Like any good character in a book, a back story must be given to make it more real...more believable. Last time around I gave you the back story of Lemy, the cat that sent Onus and Twig off course and made them continue on in their long, trying journey home. Sometimes inanimate objects can be characters as well. Sure, they don't talk, but they live lives. Sometimes, those lives are as dark and depressing and eventful as any human's life. Consider The Asylum of the Weird, if you will. The Asylum of the Weird wasn't always an asylum for undamaged people who had accidentally or "accidentally" gone into The Healing Sand. But it was destined to become something bad from its very inception. The Asylum of the Weird was originally built

by a man named Davis Parump III. He built the massive home to impress a woman he loved and intended to marry. Davis spent four years building the home, investing every second of his time and every bit of himself into it. He didn't realize how big an investment he had made until the day his masterpiece, which he called *Paradise*, was finished. When he called for his love to meet him at the front steps of the home, she was nowhere to be found. He searched the massive grounds and then he searched the small town that was a few kilometres away from the home. He searched her home, which now lay empty. He called the police and posted MISSING posters on all the trees in all the neighbourhoods within a hundred kilometres. He spent hundreds of dollars (back in those days hundreds of dollars was a lot of money) on radio ads, pleading for clues to her whereabouts. After the ads had been running for almost a year, a letter appeared under the front mat of Davis's mansion. It was addressed to "My Dearest Davis" in the familiar script of his true love. Davis sat in a chair on the front patio and sliced the top of the envelope open with the jade-handled letter opener his love had given him during their first few weeks of courtship. He slid a thin piece of folded paper out of the envelope and sucked in a deep breath. He unfolded the paper and began to read. My Dearest Davis, it said again. Four years ago you left my home and promised to return with the greatest gift I would ever be given. I laughed and waved at you as you walked through the front door and down the walkway. You did not tell me where you were going or how long you would be. After a year of waiting, without a single word from you, I figured you had left me. I figured our love wasn't meant to be. I mourned the loss, for I loved you more than anything in this world. But eventually I moved on. I had to. A week ago I heard your your voice coming through my radio and I actually thought there was a ghost in my home. When I

realized what I was really hearing, my heart broke. Davis, how could you let us slip through your hands because of a house? A house I didn't need or want. I'm sorry I couldn't have worked harder to get a straight answer from you that day you left. For if I had, I would have told you that I was happy just having you. We could have lived anywhere. We could have done anything. And I would have been happy. I am happy now and I am sending this letter to you so you can move on and find the happiness it seems you are looking for. And I hope you find it. I really do. Love always, your dearest Danielle. Upon reading the letter, Davis changed the name of his mansion to *Paradise Lost* and immediately put it up for sale. He sold it to a couple of shady men with twirly moustaches and crooked ties, and he disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again. The shady men were twin brothers named Sigmund and Desmond Ewell. Their shady looks were deceiving, for these corrupt looking men were actually psychologists with a noble purpose in mind. They planned to turn *Paradise Lost* into a home for children who had been corrupted by crime. It would be a place where bad kids could go to re-learn the norms of society, where they could learn the difference between right and wrong, where they could change their bad ways before they became adults and their crimes carried a much more serious punishment. The Ewell Home for Children Corrupted by Crime or EHCCC opened a year after The Ewell brothers purchased the home from Davis Parump III. And for almost three decades it worked to set straight thousands of crooked children, with various degrees of success along the way. Some of their graduates became senators and used-car salesmen and staff members at childrens' literature magazines, while others became members of the world's most wanted criminals. Unfortunately, crime doesn't pay and the The Ewell Home for Children Corrupted by Crime eventually fell into great

debt and disrepair. When the Ewell brothers both passed away within minutes of each other, the fate of the home was determined. It would have to set its children free and close its doors for good. The home sat empty for five long years, until the folks who ran the little town just down the road secretly took it over and began moving people into it (usually late at night when they were hidden in darkness). And from that point on the home was only spoken about in whispers. It was the place where weird people went to live out the rest of their lives. Parents threatened to send their children to The Asylum of the Weird if they misbehaved. Stories about the asylum were told around camp fires. The stories made chills run down spines...made people laugh uncomfortably. What once was *Paradise* was now one of the world's greatest urban myths.

But The Asylum of the Weird wasn't a myth, for there at the end of the path Onus, Ignatious and Dudley had been walking along, it stood, dark, foreboding and very real. Dim light escaped a couple of the windows high up near the roof, but other than that, it looked abandoned. Haunted even. "That is one scary looking building," Ignatious whispered. "History has taught me to keep my distance from scary looking things. They tend to bite."

"Houses don't bite," Onus said.

"Don't be so sure of that," Dudley said and pointed to a massive window looking over the mansion's front patio. "Over there. That window is open a crack. That's our way in."

The three of them tiptoed up the mansion's front steps and toward the window. Dudley was such a big fellow that as hard as he tried to tiptoe, he still shook the ground with each step. He was, Onus thought, like an earthquake with legs. Onus was nervous about what would happen when Dudley tried climbing through the window. To his surprise, Dudley

was as agile as a cat. The round man lifted the window and then he lifted all of his weight up over the ledge and through the opening without a sound. The feat surprised Ignatious as well, because Onus could hear him mumble under his breath, "Well, I'll be a son of a gun." Onus thought about being a son of a gun and he laughed. The only way he would be a son of a gun, he thought, was if his father was one of those big blaster guns attached to robots' shoulders.

Ignatious helped Onus through the window then hopped through himself. They landed on the wooden floor of a very large, empty room, save for the hundreds of shelves of books running along three of the room's walls. Onus lifted the lamp and read the spines of the books nearest to him: *Pinpointing The Villain Gene, From Good To Bad To Good Again, Weird Here Is Normal, Positive Peer Pressure, Corruption Belongs In Politics...Not In Children, Weird Can Be Wonderful, Botany Is Not The Science Of Building Robots!*

"There's no time to waste," Dudley whispered. "We've got to find your friends and some answers and get out of here."

"I agree," Ignatious said. "The less time I have to spend in this spooky place, the better."

They left the library and entered a long hallway.

The stone walls of the hallway were lit by three low-watt bulbs that swung erratically in a breeze blowing in from some unseen crack or window. Even in the dim light, Onus could see the grime covering the stones: green and bubbly. He could see trickles of dark water running down the walls, pooling in the center of the hall. He could smell the neglect in the asylum. It smelled like a garbage pail full of used baby diapers and old, wet grass. He plugged his nose, but the smell was like a superhero, able to slip through skin and bone...unstoppable.

"I don't know how much longer I can tolerate this gross smell," Onus cried out.

"We've got to be close to something," Dudley said as they walked down the hallway. "The smell is getting worse."

"If that's the case, shouldn't we be heading away from it?" Ignatious asked.

Dudley stopped at a fork in the hallway. To the right was darkness. To the left was even darker darkness. He leaned into to the right hallway and sniffed. Then he leaned into the left hallway and sniffed. "Down there," he said. "The smell is terrible. It has to be down there."

"What has to be down there?" Onus asked.

"Give me the lamp and I'll show you," Dudley said.

Onus gave Dudley the lamp and the round man waddled forward. The lamp lit up a much shorter hallway. Shorter and grimier and smellier. At the end of the hallway was a giant wooden door. It looked just like the doors in the courtyard at Fang's castle in Arugula, except the only things carved into this door were several deep, craggy lines. "Those look like claw marks," Ignatious said. "They don't keep lions, or monsters from under the bed in there... do they?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Dudley said. "There aren't any lions in this part of the world."

Dudley pushed on the door and it swung open easily. He waddled through the doorway, followed slowly by Ignatious and Onus. "I was right!" Dudley said. "They're here."

He held up the lamp and what he lit up caused Onus and Ignatious to stumble back and shriek. "Are those..." Onus said, but stopped, because he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Dudley returned to the doorway they had come through and ran the dim light of the lamp along the wall. "Ah ha," he said. He flicked a switch and a series of long flourescents running along the ceiling buzzed to life. "They're all here. Every person who's ever found The Healing Sand."

"There are thousands of them," Onus said.

"Like I said," Dudley said. "It's our town's dirty little secret. I knew it was true, but I didn't know...I didn't know there were this many people."

"Look at them all standing there doing nothing," Ignatious said.

"Exactly," Dudley said. "Weird and perfect. Unable to make mistakes, to break bones, to hurt anyone's feelings, to damage property and reputations. Unable to do anything... which keeps them absolutely perfect."

"They look like action figures," Onus said. "They look like they they're waiting to be sealed behind plastic and placed on a rack in a toy store."

The Weird stood side by side like pawns on a massive chessboard. The rows were fifty long, by what had to be a hundred deep. Thousands of them, perfectly still with their hands at their sides. The only thing that gave away their state of being...the slight movement of their chests as they breathed in and exhaled out. Breathed in. Exhaled out.

And as Onus watched the rhythmic, hypnotic movement of the Weirids' breathing, the room suddenly filled with the grinding sound of gears turning and of static...just like the static that plays out of your stereo speakers between the songs on your favourite record. Large, imposing silhouettes of a man (or a monster) appeared on the room's four walls. "Heads up! Mouths open," a voice from behind the silhouettes boomed. "Heads up! Mouths open!"

In unison the hundreds of Weird looked up and opened their mouths wide. Onus, Ignatious and Dudley looked up with them and saw thousands of clear tubes lower from out of the ceiling. A tube was positioned directly above every Weird person in the room. Thick goop funneled through the tubes and oozed down into the mouths of the Weird. "Chew. Chew. Swallow," the voice boomed. "Chew. Chew. Swallow."

Goop filled the Weirds' mouths and spilled down their necks. What didn't go into their stomachs ended up on the floors. Days, months, years worth of it, rotting away. It was this rotting mess that Onus could smell in the hallway. It was this rotting mess that gave away the Weirds' location.

Onus couldn't watch the feeding anymore. It was one of the most unsettling things he had ever seen, and don't forget, he had seen a museum filled with human legs. Unease filled his body. The feeling was like a message in code, like the ghosts of the chess players that used to be in his head were trying to tell him something from beyond his brain's limbic system. He stepped back and looked at Dudley. "I don't think this is a place we should be," he said. "This is a very bad place."

"There are answers here," Dudley said. "There may even be a cure."

"If there is a cure," Ignatious said, "you'd think they'd have used it by now. I think I agree with my little buddy here. This is a very bad place and we should probably leave."

"Ahhhhh," Dudley sighed. "But this is how our world works, isn't it? When something is too good to believe, like The Healing Sand and desert mirages and zero-calorie cola, usually there's a ton of bad behind it. I agree, this is a lot more bad than I could have ever imagined, but if we're going to make it right again, we have to stay and find something to help us. To help them. We have to. I will no longer idly stand by watching. I won't!"

It is usually at this point in the movie or in the book, just after one of the main characters has made a declaration of sorts, that something bad happens to him or her. I would like to say that this book breaks from tradition, that Dudley, Onus and Ignatious easily find all the answers they are looking for, but I can't, because I know that hiding in that room behind one particularly large Weird person was William Ernest Fang

and his two newest lackeys, Twig and Evan the doctor. And I know that Fang was extremely angry. So much so that, as he was hiding, he was biting his tongue so hard that it had started to bleed. You see...well, why don't I let Fang tell you what was bothering him.

"Unbelievable!" boomed a voice. A vaguely familiar voice.

Onus, Igantious and Dudley looked up at the ceiling and scratched their heads all at the same time. It wasn't the same booming voice they had heard earlier and it wasn't coming from the ceiling.

"It appears my grand distraction has done anything but..."

With that, William Ernest Fang and his hyper monkey Felix stepped out from behind a particularly large weird person. Twig and Evan the doctor were pressed up tight against Fang's sides like they were attached to the villain with villainous velcro (isn't that fun to say? Villainous velcro!). Twig and Evan had the same vacant look on their faces as everyone else in the room...everyone save for those that weren't weird. If I could describe the look on Onus's face at that moment it would be somewhere between seeing a flying saucer and hearing a rattling in your closet late at night. Disbelief, amazement and utter terror. Onus wondered if Fang had implanted some sort of tracking device in his brain or behind his neck. It was the only explanation he could come up with for their constant run-ins. He looked at Twig and tried to get some sort of signal from him that he was alright, but Twig wasn't alright. He was weird and it hurt Onus to see that. It made him want to find a cure for the weirdness more than ever before.

"By grand distraction," Dudley said, "I would assume you mean the destruction of my home and my glorious robot collection?"

Fang lunged at Dudley and grabbed him by the neck lifting him several inches off the ground. Twig and Evan stayed firmly stuck to Fang's side. "You're that skittish fellow from the beach, aren't you?" Fang said. "The one who promised to get the locals involved after our little skirmish?"

"And you, Sir, are a terrible man," Dudley spat out.

"I will not disagree with you there," Fang said and laughed. He tossed Dudley to the ground and turned his attention to Onus. "I should have assumed you'd come for your friend Stick or Branch or whatever his name is, but I've learned never to assume anything...because we all know what happens when we assume things, don't we?"

"We're here to find a cure for Twig and Evan," Onus said. "That's all. We really don't want any more trouble. There's already been way too much of that."

"Well I'm here for all of these wonderfully weird people!" Fang boomed back. "Look at them. There are people here from all over the world: different colours, different races, different clothing, different faces. I was foolish for thinking just legs or hair would make me happy. Foolish, I tell you! This, my little gnat of a friend, is the perfect collection and I want it and I'm going to take it. My lackeys will be here in the next few minutes with several large cargo trucks. I'm taking them all, including your little friend and the unhelpful doctor."

"But you can't collect people," Onus said. "That's just wrong."

"What is truly wrong is you always getting in my way," Fang said. "And I will not allow that to happen this time."

Dudley waved away the stars and canaries floating around his head, scraped off the muck caked to his elbows and jumped up off the ground. He stepped up next to Onus and patted Onus on the shoulder. Ignatious joined them. "Well," Dudley said, "if you think you can waltz in here and

take something that doesn't belong to you, then first you're going to have to get through the three of us."

"Is that a challenge or a joke?" Fang laughed. "If that's all I have to do, then this collection is as good as mine. Getting through you three will be like getting through a wall made of paper. Easy-peasy."

Fang snapped his fingers and said, "Keep them away from me."

Twig, Evan and Felix separated themselves from Fang and rushed toward Onus, Ignatious and Dudley, easily bowling them over like they were made of straw and feathers. "Twig, stop this," Onus cried. "This isn't you."

"Keep them away," Twig said without emotion. "Keep them away." He jumped on top of Onus and pinned him to the ground with his hands and his knees. Meanwhile, Evan had Dudley pinned to the ground and Felix had Ignatious pinned to the ground. It appeared that the good guys were losing the battle. Easily. Fang clapped and danced around some of the Weird that were standing next to him. "Look at her wristwatch," he said. "It's delightfully shiny. Oh oh, look at his cufflinks. They're shaped like little guitars. Delightful. Darling and delightful!"

Onus shook and wiggled, trying to free himself, but Twig's strength was unbelievable. Twig was more like a giant oak on top of him. "Twig," Onus said, looking into his lost friend's eyes. "If you're in there, please let me go. I'm here to help you."

"Oh my golly gosh!" Fang yelled. "This one's wearing penny loafers and they actually have pennies in them! Where oh where are my lackies? I have to get my collection loaded up and back home so I can set it up and start charging people an entrance fee to view it. Felix, what should I charge? Ten dollars?"

Felix growled and goopy spittle that smelled and looked

like burnt coffee spilled from his mouth onto Ignatious's cheek. "I know," Fang said. "I know. I know. That is not nearly enough to charge for such an extensive exhibit. Twenty-five...no, thirty dollars. That's what I'll charge."

Onus knew the situation had gone from bad to worse. The strength the weird people had was no match for someone who wasn't weird, even if that person was an Olympic weightlifter. Onus's only hope was that his sister Isis would somehow see, or sense this trouble and intervene as she had several times before...as her contract stated she could. If ever there's a time to help out, Icy, now is it, he thought. But as the minutes passed and Fang continued dancing around, inspecting his collection, the hope that Isis would appear faded. She must be really distracted, Onus thought. She must be counting the residents of an exterminated ant hill... or apartment building. He shivered at the thought of anyone being caught in Dudley's collapsed apartment building. He tried not to think about the possibility that if there had been someone caught, he was indirectly responsible for their untimely demise. But it's hard not to think such a thing when your mind is full of negativity. "Please Twig," he whispered. "Let me go so we can try to make everything right again. So I can make everything right again."

Twig did not budge and Isis did not show. But something else happened, something strange and unexpected. That static sound Onus had heard earlier, filled the massive room full of weird people. Onus figured the Weird were about to be fed again, but what eventually boomed out of hidden speakers had nothing to do with chewing or swallowing. "Capture the monkey, the dancing fool, the doctor and the boy shaped like a twig," the voice boomed. "Capture them and don't let them go!"

The Weird broke from their formation and grouped around their targets like a swarm of bees. Fang hollered at

them to stop, but his voice was ineffective...lost among the chatter of the Weird. "Capture the dancing fool," the swarm around him chanted in unison.

Onus looked up at all the blank faces swarming around him and Twig. "Capture the boy shaped like a twig," they chanted. Suddenly, Twig was off of him and being carried away into a corner of the massive room. He looked over and saw Evan and Felix, in all his fury, on top of other swarms, being carried off to corners of the room. In yet another corner he could see Fang's swarm locking their arms together, forming a weird, impenetrable circle around him.

Onus stood up and ran over to Ignatious, who was rubbing his face with the sleeve of his shirt. "Ewww," he said. "That monkey drooled all over me and it stinks. I don't think I'll ever get the smell off of me."

He helped Ignatious to his feet before the two of them ran over to Dudley and helped him to his feet. "What just happened?" Onus asked. Dudley and Ignatious shrugged their shoulders.

"Whatever it was, it was just in time," Onus said.

"I think we need to find whoever that was," Dudley said.

"I agree," Ignatious said. "It sounds like they may know what's going on here."

The three of them ran out of the room full of weird people and back into the grimy hallways of the asylum. They moved up and down the hallways, turning doorknobs and pushing on doors. Onus found storage closets filled with moldy mops and buckets filled with liquid that looked like oil. He found bedrooms with bunkbeds and three-legged desks, and he even found the kitchen with a fridge full of expired salad dressing. What Onus, Ignatious and Dudley didn't find was the person behind the booming voice. As luck would have it, the booming voice found them.

They had made it to the top floor, having exhausted themselves for almost an hour searching the rest of the asylum. As Onus reached for the first door in the long hallway, the booming voice from the room full of weird people boomed out. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"My name...my name is Onus Livesay," Onus said to the ceiling, not sure of where he should be looking. "And these are my friends Ignatious and Dudley. My friend Twig, who was perfectly normal, was forced into The Healing Sand and now...and now..."

"He's like the rest of them," the voice said, finishing off Onus's sentence.

"Yes, he's weird," Onus said. "And he's downstairs right now with a terrible man named Fang who was weird even before he went into the sand, and now Fang says he is going to take all of those helpless weird people away and make somesort of exhibit with them and he's going to charge people thirty dollars to see his exhibit. I just can't let him do that."

"Of course he can't do that!" the voice boomed as they had become accustomed to it doing. "That would be stealing and stealing is wrong. Those people belong to the town... to the asylum...to me. So why, I now ask, are you opening doors in a place you don't belong? You are no better than that terrible man downstairs, because you are trespassing and trespassing is a crime, just like stealing."

"Well hold on there just a minute, partner," Ignatious said. "We are nothing like that man downstairs. We are noble, thoughtful and helpful. We are good people."

"And I live in the town you speak of," Dudley said. "And my taxes pay for this place. They pay your salary. So I have as much right as you do to be here. And I am here to help Onus help his weird friend and to stop that terrible man downstairs from doing anymore bad. He's already destroyed

my home and my precious robot collection. He's already..." Dudley stopped. He was livid and he knew he had said all he needed to. The man with the booming voice had to make the next move.

Silence hung in the air, heavy as a whale on a beagle's back. Sounds of struggle and of reversing cube vans echoed through the asylum.

"I wonder if he's still there," Ignatious whispered.

"I'm still here!" the voice boomed. "I'm just going through the database of names and faces in my head. Connecting dots, or more specifically, constructing robots."

"Robots?" Dudley said.

Very politely, the once booming voice asked, "You wouldn't happen to be Dudley Davenport, also known as DX679, leader of the 49th Robot Brigade in *World of Robots*? The very same Dudley Davenport who created *World of Robots*?"

"Yes, that is me," Dudley said sheepishly, which has nothing to do with sheep and a whole lot to do with embarrassment.

"Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!" the once booming voice blubbered. "You are a true legend in the online robot role-playing world. You're almost as mythical as that fellow who created *The Alien Versus The Pirate* videogame then disappeared, never to be heard from again. I just can't believe you are here...in my asylum...in the flesh."

"Well, I ummm...I thank you," Dudley said. Really, it's just my passion." It was his turn to blubber. Being placed in the same sentence (and realm) as Ignatious Crow, creator of *The Alien Versus The Pirate* was an unbelievable honour. Had he and the man behind the booming voice known the Ignatious standing next to Dudley was that Ignatious Crow, who knows what would've happened in that hallway on the top floor of The Asylum of the Weird. Of course, Ignatious

wasn't about to give away his true identity, so we will always be left wondering.

"Don't be humble," the voice said. "You've created a whole world for people like me. People who are afraid to come out from behind closed doors. You've given the weak and the picked on a place to be something they never could be in real life. Strong. Unafraid. Made of metal."

"Up until today, I thought that was true," Dudley said, locking his sheepishness up behind a wooden fence in his mind. But let me tell you, it's actually not that hard to come out from behind your closed door and take a stand. I'm doing it now and it feels amazing! You just need someone who believes in you..." Dudley looked down at Onus and smiled. "We really need you to open up your door to us and give us a hand, because I...because we believe you might be the only one who can help us."

At the very end of the asylum's top-floor hallway a door creaked open and a thin arm, swimming in the droopy sleeve of a white jacket, poked out and waved at Onus, Ignatious and Dudley. The three of them hurried down the hallway and went into the room, where they were quickly lit up by dozens of burning candles and hundreds of tiny monitors and blinking lights. The monitors reminded Onus of Fang's office in the casino in Cygnus Monde. But the blank faces filling up these monitors weren't of gamblers and children in pens, they were the blank faces of the Weird and their faces remained blank even as Fang's lackeys pulled at them, trying to break the formations they had made around Fang, Twig, Felix and Evan. Sitting in a swivel chair in front of the monitors was a man as thin as a rake, and what appeared to be twice as tall.

"My name is Doctor Peter Imple, also known as Zort6 of the 78th Robot Brigade," he said in a high-pitched, nasally voice. He stood up and looked down at them. Dr. Imple

towered over Dudley (the largest and tallest of the three) by almost a foot. To Onus, he looked like a giant stickbug in a doctor's coat. Dr. Imple shook their hands and said, "Of course I will help the great Dudley Davenport and his friends."

"But you're not the same person who was talking to us earlier, are you?" Onus asked, shocked more by his voice than by his appearance.

"Oh yes. Yes, I am," said Dr. Imple. "I can assure you of that. You see, I use a voice modification unit to make me sound bigger and stronger. Plus, it is this deep, booming voice that has been imprinted on the Affected."

"Affected? Imprinted? What are you going on about, partner?" Ignatious said.

"I find the term 'Weird' to be rude and vile," Dr. Imple said to Ignatious. "I much prefer 'affected'. It makes their condition sound a little more serious. I just don't know where and when calling them 'weird' became common practice."

"I think I like 'affected' better, too," Onus said.

Dr. Imple nodded at Onus and went on to explain that the Weird, I mean the Affected were like baby ducks in the way that they imprinted themselves onto the first authoritative thing they saw and heard, and they followed the direction of that thing from there on out. The booming voice modulator had been put in place decades earlier when the asylum was first opened up. Doctors came and went, but the voice and the imposing silhouette remained the same.

"It is what keeps all of those poor people alive," Dr. Imple explained. "It tells them when and how to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom. Gross, I know, but also very necessary."

"So you can make them do anything?" Onus asked.

"Yes, but it is not ethical to do anything more than keep them alive. Do you know what ethical means?" Dr. Imple asked Onus. Onus shook his head. "I had a hard enough

time telling them to get those people and that...that thing that looks like a monkey full of jumping beans off of you. It was easy to see they were the bad guys and they had to be subdued, but I can't imagine how many sworn oaths I broke by doing that."

"We can't thank you enough for doing that," Dudley said. "But now we have to ask another favour of you...and this may require you to break a few more oaths. We need you to tell us how to fix the Weird...I mean the Affected."

Dr. Imple sat back down in his swivel chair and set the chair into a swivel. After three full rotations he skidded to a halt using the heel of his right foot. "I wish I could say to you, 'that is no problem,'" Dr. Imple said. "But it is a problem, because I don't know how to fix the Affected. If I, or anyone else who had worked here over the years did know, this place would not exist. The people downstairs would be home again, living normal lives. The Healing Sand does a terrible thing to people who aren't broken and we have been trying for almost as long as The Healing Sand has existed, to find a way to reverse its effects. We just haven't been able to do it."

"So Twig will be that way forever and there's nothing we can do about it?" Onus said. This was the worst outcome imaginable. It was worse than him being blind and worse than him having a head full of swan lice. At least, with a little management, those two options still allowed him to experience life. Onus wanted to cry for Twig's loss. And for his loss of Twig.

"I'm afraid so," Dr. Imple replied.

But Onus couldn't accept the finality of Dr. Imple's words. He had seen too many unbelievable things to think a cure was impossible. "That's not good enough!" Onus shouted. "Twig has fought through too much to lose it all. I will not give up finding a cure. There has to be an answer here. There just has to be."

Ignatious put a hand on Onus's shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. "Don't fret, partner. I'm sure there's an answer here. It just might take a little more work than we originally anticipated."

"Well," Dr. Imple said, "unless you know a witch who can reverse the spell cast on The Healing Sand, it'll take the work of all the doctors, scientists, physisists and ice-cream vendors in the world to help find a cure, and even then it's not a sure thing."

Onus didn't like Dr. Imple's negative attitude one bit, but he didn't know just how hard Dr. Imple had worked trying to find a cure. He didn't know that Dr. Imple hadn't had a vacation in fifteen years. He hadn't sat down and watched a television sit-com or had a meaningful conversation with his family in almost as long. Other than his time playing *World of Robots*, Dr. Imple had devoted his life to finding a cure for the Affected and he had very little to show for it. Had Onus known this, perhaps he would've understood the negativity behind Dr. Imple's attitude. But it wasn't Dr. Imple's negative attitude that was affecting Onus, so much as what Dr. Imple had said to voice his negative attitude.

"What did you say about witches?" Onus asked.

Dr. Imple laughed. "We've never given up on searching for a scientific breakthrough, but we concluded long ago that if science didn't hold the answer, then that only left magic. The sand was created by witches, so we must assume only a witch can uncreate it. Problem is, no one around here, or anywhere for that fact, knows any witches. For all we know, they're extinct, like dinosaurs."

Had the four people in the observation room on the top floor of the Asylum of the Weird been observing the hundreds of little monitors along the back wall and not conversing about witchcraft and science's limitations, they would have noticed Fang reaching for a rope that was dangling above

his head. And they would have seen Fang being hoisted up above the prison of weird people around him. And they would have seen his lackeys giving each other high fives for concocting the machine that freed their boss. But the four people in the observation room on the top floor of the Asylum of the Weird didn't see any of that happening, so when Fang burst through the door of the observation room with a dozen of his lackeys following close behind him, everyone inside the room was caught off guard. And when someone is caught off guard, bad things tend to happen. Goals are scored. Things are stolen. People are made to look foolish.

"A party and I wasn't invited," Fang said. "The rudeness in this room is immeasurable."

He snapped his fingers and his lackeys rushed (as much as lackeys with wooden legs can rush) Onus, Ignatious, Dudley and the doctor. The lackeys quickly subdued them, stepping on their feet and tying their arms behind their backs with cloth strips torn from old doctors' jackets. The four of them fought with every ounce of strength they had left, but the lackeys' restraints were too tight and their wooden legs were just too heavy to lift up off their feet. Fang danced around the room and ran his hand along the monitors. He spotted Felix on one of the monitors. "Hey there, pal," he said and tapped the monitor. "I'm going to fix this all up super quick so we can get home and get this exhibit up and running."

"You can't take these people!" Dr. Imple whined. "They need this place to survive. They need my direction."

"Direction, eh?" Fang said and walked over to where Dr. Imple was being held. He tapped Dr. Imple on the forehead and said, "You must be the one behind the voice, which means it isn't you who directs them, but the voice itself. All I have to do is find the voice. Am I right?"

Dr. Imple pursed his lips, Dudley coughed into his arm, Ignatious gasped and Onus drooped his head. All of this body language gave away the truth. Fang spun in a slow circle eyeing every square inch of the room. When he spotted a microphone, his two good eyes lit up. "Aha," he said and went to the microphone. He pushed buttons and pulled levers on the board from which the microphone was connected. He tapped the microphone and the fuzzy "Pfft Pfft Pfft" of his tapping echoed throughout the asylum. "Aha," he said again.

Fang lowered his mouth to within an inch of the microphone and he cleared his throat. The phlegmy sound echoed through the asylum. This wasn't a pleasant sound at all. "All of you weirdos, please return to your positions," he said. He looked up at the monitors and saw the Weird, I mean Affected systematically returning to the spots from where they had come. Perfectly straight rows, side by side, hands at sides, faces forward. Waiting.

"Ha!" Fang laughed and clapped. "This device is wonderful! And looky looky, it is removable." He unbuckled four clamps and pulled on the unit, easily removing it from the wall. The whole thing was about the size of a suitcase. A lens on the front of it projected the large, imposing silhouette onto whatever surface it was pointed at. Speakers on the side of the unit amplified the booming voice.

"We had to make it removable," Dr. Imple whispered to Onus, "so we could regularly take the Affected out for some fresh air. We never thought about this scenario happening."

Fang hauled the unit around the room pointing it at the walls and the subdued, making the silhouette dance and jiggle over them. "Look at me," he said through the microphone. "I'm a big scary shadow and I can make you do anything. Act like a chicken. Do the robot. Eat a worm."

None of the people in the room were Weird, I mean

Affected, so Fang's requests were ignored. "Well phooey to the lot of you," he said. "I'm heading back downstairs where I'll be appreciated."

"Please," Dr. Imple said. "The device is to keep them alive, not to make them do circus tricks."

"Circus tricks," Fang said and belly laughed as he left the room.

What Fang failed to realize when he left his lackeys alone with Dudley, Ignatious, Onus and Dr. Imple was that three of the four were expert video-game players. The expert part came from constantly being able to figure out elaborate puzzles and ways to defeat the enemies in order to advance to the next level or to beat the game. Dudley sized up his enemies and whispered to Dr. Imple, "Level 475 in *World of Robots*. Defeating Mechazilla. Do you remember what his Achilles Heel was?"

Dr. Imple thought for a second and smiled. "The slow oil drip was his weakness," he whispered back.

Dudley smiled. "And do you remember how you took the bot out?"

Dr. Imple nodded. "But how does that help us?"

"Look at their ankles," Dudley said.

Everyone in the room looked down at the lackeys' ankles, because everyone in the room could hear the conversation going on between Dudley and Dr. Imple. "Be quiet!" the lackey stepping on Dudley's feet shouted. "And quit looking at our ankles."

Ignatious had never played *World of Robots*, but being an expert video-game player in his life before becoming a cowboy, he quickly figured out what Dudley was trying to say. He could see the grain of the wood in the lackeys' legs and he knew that if this were a video game he'd try to find fire or termites to defeat the enemy. He looked around the room and spotted the burning candles. He nodded at them

and Dr. Imple smiled. "Yes. Yes," the doctor whispered. "I use them to conserve energy. The monitors and blinking lights waste so much, the last thing I need is to keep the flourescents on all day long."

"We said be quiet!" the lackey standing on Onus's feet shouted. "Don't make us tell Mr. Fang that you're conspiring. He despises it when people conspire against him."

"Despises it," one of the other lackeys repeated.

During this exchange of words Onus had also deduced what everyone was talking about. He wasn't a video-game player (his mother thought video games killed brain cells and therefore, she banned them from the Livesay house. She needed her boy to keep all of his brain cells so he could grow up and be an astronaut or a sports psychologist) and the problem-solving chess players in his head were long gone, but he was becomming quite good at getting out of sticky situations on his own. I am pretty sure had Onus been down in the hole with Mr. Flex and I, he would have come up with a solution to get us out of there. "Excuse me, sir," he said to the lackey standing on his feet. "I have an itch in my nose and if I don't scratch it my head might explode."

The lackey chuckled and said, "That's the silliest thing I've ever heard."

Dudley picked up on Onus's act and said, "The boy is deadly serious. It's a very rare medical condition called Snoz-explodatosis and if the itch goes on too long, his head really will explode. It's not a pleasant sight."

The lackeys looked at one another, each shrugging his shoulders in turn. The lackey standing on Onus's feet stuck his greasy, callused index finger out and raised it toward Onus's nose. "The itch is inside the nose," Onus said.

The lackey pulled his finger away and said, "Well that's just gross. I'm not sticking my finger inside your nose."

"If you're not going to stick your finger in my nose," Onus said, "you're going to have to untie my hands so I can do it. Please, I don't know how much longer I can handle this." To add to the act, Onus started twitching his cheek.

"Untie him," the lackey standing on Ignatious's feet said. "I don't want to see any exploding heads. That type of thing is sure to mess up a person's sleep pattern. You know how important my sleep is. Untie him!"

The lackey standing on Onus's feet jumped off and ran around behind Onus. Onus felt fumbling and tugging, then he felt the sweet feeling of freedom. No ropes. No lackey's feet. He didn't waste any time. He lunged for the candles and began tossing them at the lackeys' feet.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" the lackey standing on Dudley's feet shouted. "That's not cool at all." He jumped off Dudley's feet and lunged for Onus. Onus ducked out of the way and tossed another candle. This one hit the pant leg of the lackey standing on Dr. Imple's feet. All the grease and oil in the lackey's overalls caused the pant leg to instantly ignite. Flames danced up the lackey's leg and shouts of, "I'm on fire! I'm on fire!" echoed through the asylum. The lackey ran out of the room in search of water or a hot dog on a long stick.

Now, you and I both know how dangerous fire can be. Onus knew this, too, having seen its destructive power in the casino in Cygnus Monde. Playing with fire is never a good thing to do and even though Onus wasn't playing with fire, he was being careless with it. And the last place you want to be careless with fire is in an old building with floors made of wood. Old, dry wood. Along with the lackey's pant leg, the observation room in the Asylum of the Weird went up in flames. All the lackeys jumped off of the feet they were standing on and ran for their lives. Ignatious, Dudley and Onus also ran for their lives.

When they reached the stairwell, Onus noticed the absence of Dr. Imple. Onus ran back down the hall shouting, "Doctor! Doctor! We have to get out of here."

He looked into the observation room where monitors were popping as they exploded, where paint was peeling as it came in contact with the fire's immense heat, where Dr. Imple was rushing in circles spraying down the fire with a little red fire extinguisher. He spotted Onus and shouted over the crackling of flames and floorboards, "You have to get out of here! You have to get the unit away from that terrible man and get the Affected out of here, too."

"You have to get out of here, too!" Onus shouted. "It's too dangerous. You're going to get burned or even worse..."

"Don't worry about me," Dr. Imple said. "I need to get this under control. The asylum can not go down in flames. It's too important to the well being of the Affected. Now go! Get them all out of here and when it's all under control, I'll find you."

"I'm sorry for starting the fire," Onus shouted. "I didn't know what else to do."

Dr. Imple sprayed down a red button that popped and shot flames. "If it wasn't you who started the fire," he shouted, "it would've been me. It was the only way to get to the next level. Now go finish the game!"

Onus said 'good bye' to Dr. Imple, but he was pretty sure Dr. Imple hadn't heard him, because at the moment he spoke, a fiery beam from above crashed onto the floor in front of the doctor. Onus shrieked as embers shot out at him. "Go!" Dr. Imple shouted from behind a wall of flames. "I think I've almost got it under control!" There was nothing more Onus could do except hope Dr. Imple wasn't lying to him. He turned and quickly ran to Ignatious and Dudley who were waiting for him at the staircase.

"Don't worry," Dudley said. "The walls in this place are stone. Fire has a hard time burning stone. This place will

survive and so will Dr. Imple."

Onus gave Dudley an unsure smile and descended the stairs, taking three at a time. "If this place doesn't survive," he yelled as he bobbed down the stairs, "we've got to get all of those people out of here. We've got to get that unit from Fang."

When they reached the first floor, they could hear the booming voice. "Into the vans," it boomed, echoing up and down the hallways. "One by one. Step up the ramps. Isn't this fun?"

Onus, Ignatious and Dudley rushed down the hallway toward the room full of weird, I mean affected people. The door was open and through it they could see four lines of affected people walking up ramps into four cube vans that were parked in docking bays at the back of the room. Fang was dancing around the Affected, projecting the imposing silhouette on every surface he could. "Into the vans," he sang through the unit's microphone. "One by one. Step up the ramps. Isn't this fun?"

"At least the people are getting out of the asylum," Dudley said.

"But is where they're heading any better than this?" Onus said.

"They'll still be alive," Ignatious said. "And if they're alive, they can still be helped."

Onus knew Ignatious was right. As bad as it was to let them leave with Fang, it was better than the alternative. "I think we should let them go," Onus said.

"I know what I'll do," Dudley said. "I'll call our sheriff and get him to put a tail on the vans. We'll follow them and get them once they are safely away from here."

They heard popping sounds, just like they had heard in the observation room. The three of them looked up. Paint on the ceiling was bubbling. The air around them suddenly

got much hotter. The fire was spreading. Onus wasn't happy with what they were about to let Fang do, but he knew it was their only option.

"All right," Onus said. "Let's get out of here the way we came in."

As they were about to leave Fang to his own devices, which doesn't mean the device in his hands that controls the affected people (because really, that device belonged to the asylum), but does mean to leave him alone so he can continue doing as he pleases, Onus spotted Twig and Evan standing in the corner of the massive room. The booming voice and silhouette had no power over them, because it was Fang himself – his voice and his appearance – who had been imprinted on their brains. "I can't take the chance that Fang gets away," Onus said "I have to rescue Twig. I can worry about the way he is later."

Fang was so occupied dancing around the Affected like a fool he didn't notice Onus tiptoe into the room. Felix was occupied, too. He was bouncing up and down on one of the cube van's front seats, tossing coffee beans into his mouth... and onto the seat...and out the door...and into the pocket of the lackey trying to make him stop bouncing. Onus reached Twig and tapped his friend on the shoulder. "Twig, it's me, Onus," he said. "I'm here to rescue you." Twig was so still and lifeless, he looked like one of the celebrity wax models Onus had seen at the museum during a field trip last year. The only difference between Twig and the wax model was the occasional blink from Twig's eyelids and the slight movement in Twig's chest as he breathed.

Onus pulled on Twig's arm, but Twig didn't move an inch. It was like his feet were coated in super glue and chewed bubble gum. "Come on, Twig," Onus grunted. "We have to get out of here while Fang and Felix are distracted. We have to get out of here before the fire arrives."

"Into the vans. Ha! Ha!" the voice boomed. "One by one. Step up the ramps. Isn't this fun?"

Onus changed his stance, imagining Twig's arm as a rope. If Twig wants to play Tug-o-War, he thought, then he has picked the wrong person to play against. Onus had both his hands wrapped around Twig's arm. He had all of his weight shifted to the front of his feet. He tugged, trying to get into a lean so his weight could be shifted to the back of his feet. But Twig wasn't just super glued and bubble gummed to the floor, he was also nailed, soldered and duct taped to the floor. Or so it seemed.

Onus had never felt so weak. Before, he could carry his friend to the end of the earth, but now he couldn't even move him an inch. He was at a loss as to what to do, but he didn't have to think about it too long, because Dudley and Ignatious appeared from behind him. "Step back," Dudley said.

Onus was reluctant to let go of Twig, but if he was going to lay his trust in anyone, it would be Dudley and Ignatious. It was an amazing realization considering the way he felt about Dudley only a few hours earlier. Onus let go and Dudley moved in to the spot where he had been standing. He watched as Ignatious took a few steps back, then sprinted forward full speed toward Twig. Ignatious put his hands out in front of him, palms forward, and with all his might he slammed them into Twig's upper body, knocking Twig free of the floor. Twig fell like a freshly chainsawed tree right into Dudley's arms. Ignatious steadied himself and picked up Twig's feet. They had him. "Now let's get the Sam Hill out of here!" Ignatious shouted.

"Into the vans," the voice boomed. "One by one. Step up the ramps. Isn't this...hey, what's going on over there?"

"Oh no!" Onus said.

"Hey! Hey!" the voice boomed. "Those are my weirdos!"

The imposing silhouette jiggled over their bodies as Fang ran at them.

"What you're doing is stealing," the voice boomed. "And stealing is wrong."

Fang got closer and a terrifying image flashed through Onus's mind. It was Evan being pelted by basketball-sized pieces of hail and not even flinching. All Fang had to do was tell Twig and Evan what to do and they'd do it with the power of a hundred men, women and monkeys. "Fang controls the doctor and Twig!" Onus yelled. "Cover their ears or this is going to get really bad."

We make thousands of decisions every day. We decide to drink orange juice or beet juice in the morning. We decide to put peanut butter or melted marshmallows on our toast. We decide to walk home from funerals the normal way, or take the scenic route through the forest. For most of these decisions we have an ample amount of time to rationalize possible consequences and benefits. But sometimes a decision has to be made without the proper time to think about it. These are rash decisions made not by the brain, but by the heart or the gut. The dilemma facing Onus, Ignatious and Dudley was that Evan the doctor wasn't going to move until Fang told him to. And when Fang gave the word, nothing was going to stop Evan from accomplishing his task. His ears needed to be covered so he couldn't get the command. But that meant...

"Take the boy," Dudley said. "I'll stay behind and make sure the good doctor doesn't hear that man." Dudley handed Ignatious his portion of Twig. Ignatious cradled Twig's body in his arms and stood there speechless.

"But..." Onus said.

"There is no time for buts," Dudley said. "I've made my decision. Now go. Get out of here and call the sheriff right away. He's a good man. He'll get those vans. I know he will."

"But..." Onus said.

"I'll be fine. I promise," Dudley said. "See, I really am just like X-See."

"Dudley Davenport," Ignatious said, finally finding the right words. "You're a good man, too. And I am glad I got to know you. Hopefully we'll meet again."

Dudley smiled and ran over to Evan. He stood tall and quickly covered the doctor's ears with his giant palms. "Go!" he shouted. "Go!" Fang was too close to hang around any longer. Onus and Ignatious ran awkwardly. Awkwardly is the only way two people can run when one of those people is carrying someone in their arms and the other person is trying to cover the carried person's ears. Awkward!

But it was necessary, because Fang began barking orders when he was close enough to hear without the booming voice unit. "Stop them!" he barked. "Stop them and smash them to a pulp. Just like that yucky pulp I sometimes find in my orange juice."

When Onus and Ignatious reached the large wooden entrance door, Onus looked back. Fang was pulling on Dudley, the same way Onus had pulled on Twig. But Dudley was staying strong. Onus admired Dudley's strength and vowed to tell him that one day.

Onus and Ignatious (and Twig) hurried out of the room and down the hallway made of grimy stone. As they headed for the library, the booming voice boomed out, "Get out of the vans you weirdos, and trap those nuisances any way you can. Use shark nets. Use human-sized fly paper. For all I care, dig a thousand deep dark holes from here to Timbuktu. I just want them found so I can get them out of my hair for good. Arrrg!"

After opening a dozen similar closed doors, Onus found the library. The window they had climbed through was still wide open. Onus climbed through first so he could help

Ignatious through. It's a tricky thing climbing through a window while carrying someone, so Ignatious would need all the help he could get. Onus put his hands on Twig's back and pushed, relieving some of Twig's weight and allowing Ignatious to free one of his hands so he could grab the window frame and pull himself up and over the ledge. When they were both on the firm ground of the asylum's front patio an explosion from above stole their attention. They looked up and saw fire shooting from a window on the top floor of the asylum. Dr. Imple stuck his head out of another window and spotted Onus. "No worries!" he shouted. "I think I've almost got it under control." Dr. Imple disappeared back into the asylum and the deceptive sound of rain pitter pattering suddenly filled the air. I say 'deceptive' because when Onus looked up at the sky, all he could see were billions of stars twinkling. "Why does it sound like it's raining when there isn't a cloud in the sky?" he said.

"Because that's not rain! It's footsteps!" Ignatious shouted. "We've got to move! They're coming from both sides of the asylum!"

And boy (or girl) were they ever! The Weird, I mean Affected were rushing toward Onus and Ignatious like packs of wild, unflinching animals. Like swarms of locusts. Like schools of pirahna, intent on one thing and one thing only... to capture Onus, Ignatious and Twig. The lead Onus and Ignatious had on them was slim. They ran down the front stairs and up the dark, winding path as fast as they could, but it wasn't fast enough. The Affected were closing in fast. "Too fast!" Onus shouted. "They're going to get us!"

A skinny woman wearing sunglasses and a blouse that was darker than the night was in the lead of the pack. Two men that looked like identical twins, wearing overalls and straw hats on their heads were right behind her. Their hands

were out in front of them, their fingers clamping open and closed like crabs' pinchers. The storm of hundreds of feet carrying hundreds of affected people's bodies toward Onus was deafening and terrifying. But above all the terrifying noise, Onus could hear something foreign. And by foreign, I don't mean someone from a different country speaking a different language. I mean he could hear something out of place. It was heavier and faster than footsteps. It was more like galloping.

"I'm losing my grip...on Twig," Ignatious said. "I'm just so tired."

Onus was tired, too, and thought what he was hearing was just a figment of his imagination. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept. Was it on the back of Gromley the mox? Was it in the pig pen in Cygnus Monde? Was it floating down the river in the sidecar of Clay's motorcycle? Thinking about sleep made him sleepy. His pace slowed. "I'm tired, too," he said. "I'm so so tired. But we can't give up. I don't want to be weird. I don't want to be part of a madman's exhibit. I don't!"

The skinny woman caught Onus by the shirt and forced him to a stop. More hands grabbed hold of him. Dozens of hands. Hundreds of hands. When Ignatious noticed the swarm around Onus, he stopped and let the twins take hold of him. "Well, we gave them a run for their money, eh partner?" he yelled.

Onus huffed and puffed. His head felt like it was full of all the clouds that weren't in the sky. His body felt like cookie dough the way it was being pressed and kneaded. "My only hope is that being weird is like being asleep, because I think...I think I really need to sleep."

And that's when Ignatious heard the foreign sound. But to Ignatious it wasn't foreign, because it was a sound he had heard every day for years. It was a sound that made him feel

safe and never alone. Above the shuffling of the Affected's feet and the clamping of their many many fingers, Ignatious heard the galloping of an old friend.

"Casper!" he yelled. "You found me! Oh my goodness, you found me!" A powerful NEEEEIGGGGGHHHH! tore through the night. Had the sun been up and had everything been illuminated, one would have seen tears galloping down Ignatious's cheeks like little wet horses. Let me tell you, there is no better feeling than seeing a lost loved one after reserving yourself to the fact that you might never see that loved one again. Ignatious had not seen Casper yet, but he knew the reunion was coming. In the moonlight that had weaseled its way through the cracks in the tree branches of the trees lining the path to the asylum, Ignatious could see the bodies of the Weird, I mean Affected, flying high up into the air. He could hear loud thumps as the Affected came back down and hit the ground hard. Casper was running through them like he was a bowling ball and they were fleshy pins. As strong as the Affected were, they couldn't match the horsepower inside of Casper.

Casper reached his old friend and swung his powerful head into the Affected that were holding onto Ignatious. The Affected were like pesky flies. Or extended family members looking for a place to stay during a big cross-country drive. The Affected were tossed from Ignatious in all directions, taking with them pieces of the clothing they had been holding onto.

Down the way, Onus heard the strangest sounds: cotton ripping, denim ripping, tires deflating (or more precisely, great releases of air, maybe from inside human bodies), horses neighing. He also heard the booming voice. Fang's booming voice. "Stay strong!" it boomed. "Hold your ground! Don't let a silly horsey hurt you! Don't! I want those children so I can make them gone! Gone for good!"

"Gone for good!" the Affected chanted in unison. "Gone for good!"

When all the Affected hands were off of Ignatious, Casper laid down on the ground so Ignatious could easily get onto his back. Ignatious lifted Twig up onto the horse first. Twig's weird state made him very maleable, so Ignatious was able to squeeze Twig's legs tight against the horse's sides. Ignatious gave Twig a push and when he was sure Twig was secure, he climbed onto Casper. Before setting the horse forth, Ignatious leaned down and gave Casper's neck a tight squeeze. "I knew you'd find me, old friend," he said. "My life...wouldn't have ever been the same again had I lost you for good." Casper broke free of Ignatious's embrace and looked up at Ignatious. Ignatious could see bits of the moon reflecting in Casper's eyes. In Casper's eyes he could also see relief.

The Affected were rising and shuffling back toward the man, the boy and the horse. Their authority figure had commanded them to trap the children by any means possible. And they would not stop until that was achieved. And no horse, no basket-ball sized hail, no wiley child was going to get in their way.

"Heeyahh!" Ignatious yelled when he felt the first Affected hand brush his arm. Casper stood up and ran full speed at Onus. Ignatious didn't have to say a word. The bond between him and his horse was so strong, he just had to think about what had to be done and Casper did it.

Onus couldn't move. He now knew what it felt like to be the apple inside a caramel apple. Though the Affected weren't sweet and sticky, they were a solid shell around him, keeping him firmly in place. There were no falling stars or lit birthday candles or genies in a bottle anywhere near Onus, but that didn't stop him from wishing for somebody to come along and take a bite out of that shell so he could escape.

Sometimes, though, a wish simply needs a strong enough will behind it to make it come true. And as that wish flashed through Onus's mind, a crack formed in the shell of Affected above him. Shards of moonlight appeared. Onus heard a horse neighing and more air being forced out of lungs. He felt great pressure under his arm. Then he was being lifted up off the ground. The Affected struggled to hold onto him as he also began to move forward at an alarming speed. Pieces of his shirt and pants tore away from him before he slipped out of the Affected's grasp for good. "It's me, partner! It's me Ignatious," Ignatious yelled. "And I've got you!"

With great skill, Ignatious tossed Onus up in the air. When he came back down he landed perfectly on Casper's back so he was back to back with Twig. As they rode up the path he could see moon-lit swarms of Affected running after them. Some of the Affected were carrying nets. Others were carrying shovels. Onus even thought he saw headlights and a parade of backhoes driving out from behind the asylum, but before he could really be sure, Casper ran around a curve in the path and the asylum was gone.

"And Onus and Twig never crossed William Ernest Fang's path again," Mr Flex said. "The end."

ELEVEN

When a story ends and you are still filled with questions, or there are still things that need to be explained for you to feel you had a complete reading experience, we in the writing business like to say the story has a lot of loose ends. Loose ends are never a good thing. If the shoelaces on your sneakers have loose ends, you could potentially trip and hurt yourself. If your hair is full of loose ends, you may look unkempt and people might not take your cries of wolf (or Sasquatch) seriously. We like our experiences to be complete and when they are not, we are troubled. I know that when I read a book with loose ends I can't sleep for weeks. Sometimes months. I want to write the author a letter and tell him or her that I need to know what happened to the brother that wandered off at the end of chapter seven. Or I need to know the relevance of the airplane that kept appearing throughout the book. In many stories or movies, the ending naturally comes after the big climactic escape from the villain. It could've been easy for me to end *The Healing Sand* with Ignatious, Onus and Twig riding away from *The Asylum of the Weird* as Mr. Flex had just done. We know Ignatious promised to take the boys home. We know that eventually they would get there and life would continue on. But then you'd be asking yourself, "But what about Twig's weird state?" and "What is the relevance of that

strange airplane that appeared in the first two books?" and "Who the heck is R.E. Flex?" You might even say to yourself, "Geesh, this book sure has a lot of loose ends." And you'd be compelled to write me for answers to the questions keeping you up at night.

"But Mr. Flex," I said. "You still haven't answered my initial question. How did you end up in this hole? And on that note, you still haven't explained how, or even if, Twig found a cure for his weirdness. Your story has been compelling and very entertaining, but I am afraid it has too many loose ends for me to feel it is complete."

Mr. Flex sighed. "I know. I know," he said. "I am not a lazy storyteller. I can assure you of that. It's just...well, we have been down here a long time now and during that time I have grown to like you very much. I would even consider you a friend now. I am hesitant to tie a couple of those ends up, because I am afraid of what you might think of me. Because I am afraid of losing this friendship we have formed."

"I can assure you, Mr. Flex, that no matter what you tell me about yourself, I will continue to consider you a friend for the rest of my days," I said. And I meant it. We had shared an experience not many people on this planet have shared. We were both stuck at the bottom of the same deep dark hole for several days not knowing if we'd get out of it alive. That type of shared experience creates an unbreakable bond.

And when I finished telling Mr. Flex how I felt, I heard a terrible cracking sound. "That didn't sound good," I said. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Yes," Mr. Flex replied. "That was just my dry lips cracking when I smiled." Mr. Flex then took a deep breath and, for the benefit of me (and for you, dear reader), tied up most of the loose ends in his spectacular story.

Casper had been running for almost two hours. To the east, a thin line of sunlight ran along the horizon. Morning was upon them and still Onus hadn't slept a wink. He hadn't thought about eating either, even though he was starving. He was too concerned about Twig. Twig was still one of the Weird, or more politely put, the Affected. He was breathing and blinking, but that was it. Twig was there in body only. His person...his being...that thing that made Twig Twig was gone and Onus knew he would not feel complete until he found that thing and made Twig Twig again.

"You're sure quiet back there, partner," Ignatious shouted over Casper's galloping. "Don't mean to ruin your peace, but you do know that it's never a good thing to fall asleep on a moving horse. Falling asleep on a moving horse usually ends with you in pieces on the hard ground."

"I'm not asleep," Onus yelled back. "I'm trying to figure out what to do about Twig. He's still affected and I'm really concerned about him being that way forever. Without Fang around to direct him, he's never going to play sports again, or answer a question in class, or choose whether or not to eat calamari."

"Hold on!" Ignatious shouted. Casper leaped over a small ditch. When he landed on the other side, Ignatious looked behind him to make sure the boys were still secure. "In these last few days, I've learned to never ever give up hope," he yelled. "Hope is like one of those sticky fly traps. The more hope you have, the more powerful that trap is. Eventually, something will be drawn to the trap and get stuck in it. I never gave up hope when I was lying there broken. And you two came along. I never gave up hope that I'd see Casper again. And here we are riding him."

Ignatious faced forward again and continued steering Casper in a direction unknown to Onus. Onus knew Ignatious was right. He had never given up hope that they'd find a cure for Twig's blindness and eventually, Twig got his sight back. He had never given up hope that they'd find a cure for Twig's swan lice and eventually, the itching was eradicated. He would never give up hope that they'd find a cure for Twig's weirdness, and in doing so, hopefully one day, they would find a cure for that, too. Keeping the hope was all he could do.

Onus was still sitting backwards on Casper. He could feel Casper's powerful body moving underneath him. So much strength. So much purpose. He could still feel Twig's cold, straight back against his. Stiff as plywood. He imagined Twig's being – the thing that made Twig Twig – locked in a steel box way back in Twig's head. The box was wrapped in several chains that were held together with big, rusty locks. It was like a magic trick. All Onus had to do was find the magician. Or the keys.

"Well ain't that the strangest thing," Ignatious mumbled. With the sound of Casper's hooves clomping against the ground and the wind blowing through Onus's ears, Onus only heard the word 'strange'. He assumed there was something in front of them Ignatious couldn't quite explain.

"What do you see?" Onus yelled.

"It's not what I see!" Ignatious yelled back. "It's what I smell."

Onus sniffed and smelled only Casper. "I only smell horse," Onus yelled. "That's not so strange seeing as we're riding one."

"No. No. No!" Ignatious yelled. "Look up at the sky and take a whiff! Get your nose as far away from Casper as you can!"

If the sky had a smell, Onus imagined it would be vanilla,

or cotton candy. So when he lifted his nose up to the clouds and took a whiff, what he smelled made no sense. "Well isn't that the strangest thing," Onus said.

"So you can smell it, too?" Ignatious shouted. "It smells just like..."

"Peanut butter," Onus said, finishing off Ignatious's sentence.

"But where's it coming from?" Ignatious shouted. "There isn't a bakery or grandmother's kitchen anywhere near us. Look around. There isn't anything near us. All I see are hills and fields."

Onus's nose was still pointing up in the air, sucking in great whiffs of the peanut butter smell, when a small airplane flew out from behind a puffy cloud in the sky. A stream of mist shot out from behind the plane. "An airplane!" Onus yelled.

"An airplane?" Ignatious repeated, but in question form.

"Up in the sky! Look!" Onus yelled.

Ignatious looked up and saw the plane. It was a yellow biplane with a big propeller on its nose. It was called a biplane because it had two main wings, one on top of the other. On the underside of the bottom wings were two bulls-eyes and the letters R.E.F. The plane did a series of barrel rolls. Then it dipped down and flew over top of them, so close that the wind it stirred up tussled their hair, and the mist spraying out from behind it tickled their foreheads and landed on their lips. And the mist didn't just smell like peanut butter. It tasted like it, too.

As the plane did a loop-de-loop in the sky and passed over them again, a memory flashed through Onus's mind. It was a conversation he had had with the tiny farmer just outside of Cygnus Monde (a.k.a. Omniville). The tiny farmer was talking about the mysterious appearance of the giant worms. "Two nights ago while I was sleeping out in

the field watching to see if any of my moxen moved," the tiny farmer had said, "I heard a small airplane fly overtop of me and I smelled peanut butter. I heard all this noise down at the beach, so I grabbed my flashlight and went to take a look. What I saw...what I saw was terrifying. It was horrible..."

Onus lowered his head because his neck was starting to hurt. "I don't think he's on our side!" he yelled. "I think he's trying to get us to run from him. Back to Fang."

Ignatious looked over his shoulder at Onus. "Why would you think that?" Ignatious shouted back.

"Because he's the one who made those giant worms!" Onus yelled. "I met a man a few days ago who told me he smelled peanut butter and saw a small airplane just before he saw thousands of little worms turn into three giant worms."

The biplane flew overtop of them again. This time it was upside down. This time, a gloved hand appeared from underneath the top wing. The hand was fiercely pointing at a spot up ahead of them, just east of where Casper was running.

"Peanut butter is a good smell. If he was against us," Ignatious shouted, "don't you think he would be misting us with something that smells like rotten fish or celebrity-endorsed perfume? He'd also be trying to get us to turn around. My gut says this pilot is trying to tell us something... or lead us to something."

Onus felt the area around his stomach. It rumbled and growled. "My gut is telling me the same thing, except in the bad way!" he yelled. "We should just keep going straight and ignore the person in the airplane. I don't think I can handle any more adventures today."

The biplane did another loop and flew overtop of them again. This time the plane was so close Onus could clearly see all the screws holding the plane together. As the plane

passed them, two tiny parachutes fell from it. Attached to each parachute was a scroll of paper. The parachutes landed a few hundred feet in front of Casper. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Ignatious yelled. This was horse talk for stop and Casper obeyed, slamming his front hooves into the dirt. "Hold on tight!" he continued. Onus held on to Twig's shirt with one of his hands and held on to a fold of Casper's skin with his other hand as Casper slid to a complete stop right next to the fallen scrolls.

Ignatious jumped off of Casper and picked up one of the two parachutes, carefully removing the scroll from it. He unrolled the scroll and read it aloud. "I am here to help you, not hinder you. I have been watching things from afar since Fang set up in Arugula and I think I can help the boy that went into the sand. You have to follow me. And you have to trust me. As a sign of good faith, at the end of the other parachute is a gift for the boy named Onus."

Ignatious bent down and picked up the other parachute. He removed the scroll from it, unrolled the scroll and silently read it. "I think he really is on our side," Ignatious said when he finished reading. He handed the scroll to Onus and said, "It's a letter...from your parents."

The biplane was doing barrel rolls and loop-de-loops in the sky. It was climbing to great heights, then losing power and falling uncontrollably toward the earth. The pilot would only regain power when he was a few hundred feet from crashing, pulling the biplane up and away from the ground in an act of heart-pounding timing.

Onus recognized his mother's handwriting immediately. It was the same beautiful penmanship that labelled his lunch-bag everyday, unique by the capitalization of his name. O-N-U-S. She always capitalized his name. His lip quivered. He hadn't felt this close to his mother in so long and he suddenly missed her more than ever before in his life.

ONUS, the note started.

When we lost your sister, we thought the world had come to an end. Life lost the magic that made us want wake up every morning. But there is an old saying, son, and that saying is 'time heals all wounds.' I am a firm believer in this saying. Your sister's passing wounded all of us deeply. But with your help and your unbelievable courage, those wounds healed and we found that magic again. And yes, the wounds left scars, but a scar is simply a memory of what was. We never want to lose our memories.

When Clay told us that you and Twig fell into the river, those wounds were ripped open again and this time they went even deeper. Without you, we really did start to think our world had come to an end. We really did think the magic was gone for good. We became catatonic. We couldn't get up off the couch. We couldn't speak. We were robots without circuits to run us. We were parents without the children that gave us a pure and human purpose. While we sat frozen in terror, entire police departments began looking for you. Search parties with helicopters and speed boats and search dogs in life jackets scoured the shores along the river. The Lomans even hired a man on stilts, just to get another perspective of things. Time passed and this time there was no healing. I had never cried so much in such a short period of time. Neither had your father.

And then our doorbell rang.

When we finally found the motivation to answer it, we were greeted by a man wearing a leather jacket, leather gloves and airplane goggles. He said he could do what no one else in the world could. He said he could find you. But he also said you needed to finish something very important first. He told me to write you a letter of encouragement and love, to give you the strength to continue doing what you're doing. He promised me you would make it home. I was a little doubtful, but it was the first positive thing I had heard in days about you. So I sat down and I wrote this.

Onus, my beautiful son, your father and I love you more than the world itself. We probably don't tell you this as often as we should, but believe me. You are the magic that makes us want to wake up every morning. And we miss you terribly. Be safe and be strong and finish your journey as only you can, then bring that magic back home.

Love, Mom

Onus wiped away the tears in his eyes. He thought about all the gifts he had ever been given in his life: building block spaceships, glow-in-the-dark throwing disks, a digital watch with a compass built into it, tickets to the snail-racing championships, and so much more. None could compare to the letter from his mother. He may have been starving and he may have been exhausted, but suddenly he was filled with a desire and a new-found energy to find a cure for Twig (for that had to be the important thing the pilot had alluded to) and to get back home. Onus looked up in the air and waved at the pilot who was patiently flying circles around a low flying, blimp-shaped cloud.

When the pilot noticed Onus waving, he straightened his biplane out and began flying toward the spot his finger had fiercely pointed out earlier. Ignatious climbed up onto Casper's back. When he was sure Onus and Twig were secure, he yelled, "Heeyawww!" setting Casper into a speedy gallop. Casper's fast moving hooves kicked up pebbles and small critters and clumps of earth. I'm sure you've looked up at an airplane flying high in the sky. It is a deceptive sight, because it appears to be moving as slow as a slug, but in actuality is moving faster than any car or speedboat could ever go. It's moving at hundreds of miles an hour. Casper had to cover a lot of distance fast in order to keep up.

The landscape changed as quickly as Casper was running: a field of high grass, a flatland of cracked ground,

a dense forest (the sound of the plane above the trees the only thing keeping them on course), a deserted town lined with dilapidated buildings and rusted out pick-up trucks, farmland covered in cornstalks and families of scarecrows, then rolling hills covered in the greenest grass Onus had ever seen. Up and down. Up and down. After an hour of running up and down the rolling hills, a spot appeared. Way up in front of them. The closer they got to the spot, the more the spot resembled a cabin. Ignatious and Casper were so focussed on the spot that looked like a cabin that they did not notice the biplane disappear into a cloud. But Onus did. It was a cloud the size of an aircraft carrier. The biplane had looked like a speck of dust against it. Onus watched the cloud for several minutes, but the biplane never reappeared.

"The plane is gone!" Onus yelled. "The cabin has to be our destination!"

Ignatious looked up at the sky. "I think you may be right, partner!"

Feeling Ignatious's (and Onus's) apprehension, Casper approached the cabin cautiously. The cabin wasn't spectacular by any means. It was constructed from whole logs, some still covered in bark, some still sporting the nubs of the branches broken off of them. A fireplace built with several types and colours of rocks ran up one side of the cabin. A snake of smoke slithered its way out of the top of the fireplace. Three small windows, all cracked, were built into the front of the cabin. The windows were stained brown, so seeing into the cabin was impossible.

"Whoaahhh!" Ignatious hollered, bringing Casper to a halt. He jumped off the horse and ran his hand along the horse's mane, which had grown almost half an inch since the last time he had seen it. "Good boy," he said. "You keep an

eye on our friend Twig. I don't think he's going anywhere, but just in case..."

Ignatious let go of Casper's neck and helped Onus onto the ground. "This place looks a little spooky," he said once Onus was down. "Why would the pilot want us to stop here?"

"I don't know," Onus replied. "Maybe...maybe one of the scientists who worked at the asylum lives here. Or maybe..."

The cabin door, which was built out of the logs of smaller trees and was covered in a sticky gold substance that looked like honey, swung open. Onus and Ignatious looked at each other, then looked at the darkness inside the cabin. "Or maybe," Onus whispered, "a witch lives here."

"When you say it like that," someone said from inside the cabin, "it sounds like it's a bad thing."

Onus and Ignatious took a step back as the most beautiful woman either of them had ever seen (of course, Onus would never admit this to any of his friends, or especially to his mother who had been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen up until that point) stepped through the doorway into the morning sun that was splashing down on the cabin's front patio. If she really was a witch, she was unlike any witch Onus had ever seen. There was no pointy black hat, warty nose or green skin anywhere. In fact, the woman's hair was redish blond and it flowed down her back like lava, its tips tickling the bends in her knees. Her eyes were the same magnificent blue as the sky. To Onus, it looked like someone had sucked up some of the sky's colour in a syringe and filled her pupils with it. And her skin was as white as the clouds floating by. When she smiled at her guests, Onus felt like he was floating on one of those clouds high up above him. She wore a light blue dress that rippled in a breeze that seemed to be much more gentle against her body than it was against his.

"You look tired and hungry," the woman said. "I just pulled some bread out of the oven and put on a pot of tea. Would you care to join me?"

"Ummm..." Ignatious said. "Ummm..."

Ignatious's face was bright red. His mouth twitched and he couldn't look directly at the woman. To Onus, Ignatious looked sick, or mad. "I don't think my friend, Ignatious, is well," Onus said. "Perhaps something to eat will make him better."

The woman laughed. "Oh, I think your friend is just fine," she said. "You, on the other hand, look like you've been through a lot in a very short period of time. I see so much sorrow and strain on your young face. Our childhood is so very short. It should be filled with laughter and joy and innocence, shouldn't it? When a child is burdened with so many adult problems, my heart aches."

Onus had only just met the woman, but he felt like he had known her for all his life, like she was an aunt or a neighbour who often came over to look after him. "My name is Onus," he said.

"Oh, I do apologize," the woman said. "Where are my manners? And my name is Sarah. Please do come inside and have a bite to eat. The food and drink may not heal your soul, but it will make you feel better."

"Did you know we were coming, maam?" Onus asked.

"Oh you can call me Sarah," Sarah said. "To be honest with you, I didn't know you were coming. But I did know someone was coming. I could smell peanut butter and I could hear the gallop of your horse...and then you were here."

"The pilot seemed to lead us right to you," Onus said. "Why would he do that?"

"The pilot?" Sarah repeated. "Oh...the pilot. The peanut butter. It all makes sense."

"Do the initials R.E.F. mean anything to you?" Onus asked.

This time Sarah's face went bright red. "Oh yes they do," she said and smiled. "Please come inside and we can talk more."

Onus took a hold of Ignatious's sweaty and warm hand and pulled him toward the doorway. His reluctance to move was baffling.

"Will your friend on top of the horse be joining us?" Sarah asked as Onus struggled with Ignatious.

"He can't," Onus replied. "He's affected."

"Affected?" Sarah said. "Affected with what?"

"Weirdness."

"Oh dear," Sarah said. "That's not good. That's not good at all." She turned and rushed back into her cabin.

"I'm okay. I'm okay," Ignatious said when Sarah was gone. "You don't have to pull me anymore."

"I was worried you had become affected, too," Onus said. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine," Ignatious said. "You'll understand what is affecting me when you're a little older. Let me just compose myself, partner, and then we can head in there."

Ignatious sucked in a deep breath and stood up as straight as a board. He licked his thumbs and ran them along his eyebrows. He fluffed his shirt and patted down some hair sticking out at the back of his head. "How do I look?" he asked Onus.

"You look fine," Onus said, "But you're acting really strange."

Ignatious laughed and patted Onus on the back. "Let's go in and see what Sarah has to say," he said.

When they entered the cabin, Sarah was seated on a ratty, green couch in the middle of it. Placed on a small, crudely built log table in front of her was a tray with a teapot, three

mugs and a plate full of buttered bread on it. Sarah was reading a book that looked like it was a thousand years old. Its spine and covers were as worn and tattered as the couch. Other than the couch, the only other large item in the cabin was a rusty old stove. A rusty pot filled with some sort of liquid bubbled on top of one of the elements. Three shelves ran along a wall beside the stove. The shelves were covered in dozens of different-sized glass jars. Each jar was filled with something different. One jar looked like it was filled with dried mangoes, while another looked like it was filled with the tiny feet of some amphibious creature. But that couldn't be. The cabin and everything inside of it seemed so drastically different than the person who owned them. Sarah was so put together...so perfect, while everything around her was in a state of ruin. She noticed Onus and Ignatious and said, "Come in. Come in. There aren't any seats, but the couch is big enough for the three of us."

Sarah placed a bookmark in the book and set it down beside the teapot. She poured Onus, Ignatious and herself a mug of steaming tea. Onus jumped up onto the couch next to her. Ignatious sat next to Onus, grasping the arm of the couch tightly. The sight of food was too much to bear. Onus's stomach grumbled so loud it shook the couch pillows he was sitting on. "Help yourself," she said and pointed at the bread.

"Thank you, Sarah," Onus said. He snatched a piece of bread and handed it to Ignatious. Ignatious ate it in one bite. Onus then snatched a piece for himself and surprisingly, ate it in one bite, too.

"You boys are hungry," Sarah said. "There's lots of bread, so don't stop with just one piece. It's delicious, isn't it?"

"MmmHmmm," Onus said as he chomped on the bite of bread still in his mouth. When he swallowed it down he looked up at her and said, "I'm sorry for speaking with my mouth full. I didn't realize how hungry I was."

"No need to apologize," Sarah said. "You've been away from home a very long time now. In that time you have been fed a diet of fear, worry and confusion, which has, up until this point, kept you full. With home so close, all those normal feelings, like hunger and longing, are coming back to you."

"How do you know so much about me?" Onus asked.

She smiled and Onus thought he saw diamonds in her teeth. "I can see it all in your face," she said. "All of those little lines running along your forehead and underneath your eyes are like little movie screens to me. They show me everything that has happened to you."

"Are you a witch?" Onus asked.

Sarah smiled again. Her smile made him smile. It made him feel safe. "Give me your hand," she said. Onus didn't hesitate as he normally would when a girl wanted to hold his hand. Using one of the napkins on the tray, he wiped the crumbs off his hands and placed his right hand in her upturned palm. Her skin was as hot as fire, but instead of burning him, it soothed him. "Now close your eyes tight and think about something special to you," she said.

She squeezed his hand and his head flashflooded with memories of Isis: the sly way she looked at him when their mother was scolding them, the annoying (but endearing) way she pulled on her hair when she was nervous, her laughing at the worst jokes ever on their favourite television shows, the way she reached out and held his hand whenever they entered a doctor's or dentist's office. Sarah's hand suddenly felt smaller and even softer. It suddenly felt familiar. It was a touch so far removed from Onus's life, but so recognizable it would never be forgotten. And it was a touch warm with life. Pumping blood. Sweating. "Isis," Onus whispered. He snapped opened his eyes. His twin sister wasn't sitting there next to him holding his hand. She wasn't even in the room. But Onus knew he had just been closer to her than he had

been since she turned purple, and he was grateful. "Thank you, Sarah," he said quietly.

Sarah loosened her grip on Onus's hand and looked at him seriously. "Why did the man in the airplane lead you here?" she asked.

"Because I think he knew you could help us make my friend normal again," Onus said.

"But Onus," Sarah said. "What you perceive as normal may be completely different from what I perceive as normal. I mean, look at how I choose to live. Is this normal to you?"

The dilapidated cabin was not a place Onus would choose to live. He was pretty sure he wouldn't even choose to camp in a place as rough and rustic as the cabin. Choosing to make such a place a home wasn't normal to him. It wasn't normal at all! "I just want him to be the same Twig he was before he fell into The Healing Sand."

Sarah gasped and let go of Onus's hand. She stood up and went to the kitchen area of the cabin where she began unscrewing lids on several different jars. "We were all taught about the origin of The Sand," she said as she sniffed a jar full of what looked like rainbow-coloured mushrooms. "But we all thought it was an old wives' tale...an urban myth, like the aligator in the attic."

Onus and Ignatious watched her as she tipped the jar and shook a few of the colourful mushrooms into a bowl. She picked up another jar from the shelf. It was filled with what looked like hair from a shaggy dog. She added some of its contents to the mushrooms and she mixed it all together with her hands. When she finished mixing it all together she took a red bottle from a cupboard under the shelves and she poured the golden liquid that was inside the bottle overtop of her mixture. "Obviously, their intentions were good," she said as she put down the bottle and picked up a box of matches next

to the stove. "And you cannot fault good intentions. But in their haste, they did not see the dark side of their gift. For if they had, I know in my heart they would have never given it to those people."

Sarah lit a match and threw it into the bowl. The contents quickly ignited and a ball of flame shot up into the air causing her to jump back. The flame burned away before it reached the ceiling. When Sarah was absolutely sure a fire wouldn't take hold of her fire-friendly cabin, she picked up the bowl of burnt mushrooms and dog hair and she walked toward the cabin's front door. When she was next to the couch, she stopped and looked down at Onus. "Don't be afraid of the world, Onus," she said and ran her finger along Onus's head. "It is filled with so much mystery and beauty. And sometimes they are one and the same." Sarah smiled and continued on outside.

"Should we follow her?" Onus asked.

Ignatious, who was still holding onto the arm of the couch like it was a life preserver and he was lost at sea, shrugged his shoulders. "I'm good right here, partner," he said. "That woman is some kind of amazing and whatever she's up to, I don't think I want to get in her way. But you feel free to head on out there."

Whatever Sarah was up to involved Twig, and Onus knew he should at least offer to help out, seeing as Twig was his friend. He shoved another piece of buttered bread into his mouth and got up off of the couch. But he didn't get much further than that.

A burst of colour and sound flew in through the open cabin door. "Onus! Onus! Onus! I'm me again!" The burst declared. And then the burst exploded against Onus's chest, which caused his head to fling backwards. Onus felt arms wrap around him and pressure as the arms squeezed with all their might. "I'm me again! I'm me again!"

Ignatious let go of the couch arm and jumped to his feet. "Hooey!" he yelled. "We're back to three!"

Onus swung his head forward again and saw the side of Twig's head next to his. "I'm me again," Twig whispered as he hugged Onus and refused to let go. Twig was crying and shaking.

Onus had never hugged his friend so long. Where before it would have been an uncomfortable and strange thing to do, now it felt right. It felt perfectly normal. He patted Twig on the back and said, "You were always you to me, Twig. But it's good to hear you speak again. It really is."

Twig finally let go and stepped back so he could look Onus in the eyes. "It was so strange," he said. "It was like I was trapped in this dark room. I was all there, but I wasn't out here, if that makes any sense? I could think and talk to myself and move around the room, but I couldn't get out of it. And the worst thing is, I could hear everything going on outside the room. I could hear Fang shouting at people to do things. I could hear him telling me to do things and I was thinking I would never do what he wanted me to do and I was willing myself to stay still, but obviously, some other force was controlling me. Some other part of my body. My gut or my kneecaps. I don't know. It felt like I was in that room for a thousand years and then I smelled something gross and the walls around me crumbled down and my eyes opened and a beautiful light filled them and I was on top of a horse. I can't explain it. I just can't explain it."

"Where's Sarah?" Onus asked.

"Who's Sarah?" Twig said.

Onus ran to the door and looked outside. He could see for miles around and there was no sign of Sarah anywhere. "This is her cabin," he said. "She went outside to fix you. This is impossible. There's nowhere she could go in such a short amount of time. I'd be able to see her."

"Onus," Twig said. "It was just me and the horse. I never saw a Sarah. I did have a heck of a time getting down off of that horse, though."

Ignatious and Twig joined Onus at the door. Casper was nibbling on one of his hooves. A tumbleweed rolled by. The clouds in the sky had disappeared. "The world is mighty mysterious and mighty beautiful, isn't it partners?" Ignatious said. The boys nodded their heads. "Well then," Ignatious continued. "Let's say we get you boys home. I think it's about time. What do you think?"

Finally. Home. So close. Never had they been closer to it since this whole adventure had begun. The three of them silently walked out of Sarah's cabin. Ignatious shut the door behind them and led them down to Casper. They each gave Casper a pet along his mane and then Ignatious helped them up onto Casper's back before climbing on top himself. With a "Heeyaw" from Ignatious, they were off and running.

Casper ran for hours before any sort of civilization appeared. In that time no one spoke. No one had to. It had been agreed at the outset that they would ride until they found someone with a map. For only a map would set them in the proper direction. It was a small town they first found. There were a few dozen homes in the town. There was a gas station at the edge of it and a large water feature next to the gas station. Gas stations usually carried maps. So that was where they would go. A series of large black spots peppered the ground that surrounded the outskirts of the strange little town. As Casper got closer to the town, they realized the spots were actually holes. There were five of them in total. Casper cautiously stepped up beside one of the holes. All four of them peered down into it. It was so deep and dark they couldn't see the bottom.

"Well now, isn't this a head scratcher?" Ignatious said, breaking the silence that had gripped them for hours. "Why

would a small town dig such big holes around it?"

"Maybe they're looking for gold," Twig said. "Or trying to dig to China."

"Or maybe," Onus said, "they're trying to trap something...or someone. Think about it. If we had come here during the night, we might not have seen theses holes."

"These are darn big holes," Ignatious pointed out. "If they were meant to trap something, I don't think it was a human."

"Monster traps?" Twig said.

"When we were running out of that room in the asylum," Onus said, "Fang was commanding the affected people to trap us any way they could. I remember him saying something about shark nets and digging holes."

"You don't think those weird people dug these holes, do you?" Ignatious said.

"I don't know," Onus replied. "But when we were riding away from the asylum I was sure I saw some of the affected people holding shovels and others driving backhoes. I know they use backhoes to dig holes."

"All I know," Twig said, "is that I want to find a map and get out of here."

"Just what I was thinking, partner," Ignatious said, and tapped Casper on the neck. Casper carefully walked around the hole and toward the gas station on the edge of the strange little town.

The gas station had a name: **Donnelly's Gas and Grill**. It had a single pump, which must have once been white, but was now rusted from top to bottom. Long grass and weeds sprouted up from the hundreds of cracks crisscrossing the station's asphalt. Cracks also crisscrossed the windows of the gas station. By the looks of it, **Donnelly's Gas and Grill** was abandonned. Casper walked up to one of the cracked windows and the four of them looked through it. They saw

a counter and a cash register and an old diner grill, but little else inside.

"You boys hang tight out here," Ignatious said. "I'll go in and see if I can find us a map."

Ignatious jumped off Casper and walked toward the station's cracked glass door.

"Be careful," Onus said.

"Careful is my middle name," Ignatious replied. "Actually, my middle name is David, but Careful would be a pretty cool middle name, wouldn't it?" He laughed and entered **Donnelly's Gas and Grill**.

Through the cracked window the boys watched Ignatious step up to the counter and look behind it. They watched him search the empty aisles of the gas station. They watched him throw his hands up in the air in frustration. They watched him walk back toward them. And that is when Twig noticed the door at the back of the station swing open.

"Behind you! Behind you!" Twig yelled. But the cracked windows were too thick. Twig's voice couldn't get through. Ignatious didn't hear him and therefore couldn't see the man with the shovel in his hands rushing at him. Fast. And furious.

Onus and Twig hollered at the top of their lungs, "Look out!" They waved their arms and pointed. Ignatious saw them waving and waved back.

Ignatious reached the station's door and as he pulled it open, the boys heard the man with the shovel yell, "Out with you zombie!" It was only then that Ignatious knew he was being pursued. He slipped through the doorway just as the man swung the shovel at him. The shovel smashed against the glass door adding a new crack to the web of cracks that were already there. Ignatious pushed his shoulder into the door and held it closed so the man couldn't get out.

"We're not zombies!" he yelled.

"Liar!" the man with the shovel yelled back. "All I've seen these last twenty-four hours are zombies. The living are all gone. Hiding in the hills, or food in those things' stomachs."

"But we're talking to you," Ignatious said in a much calmer voice. "I know a thing or two about zombies and I know they can't hold a conversation."

The man with the shovel scratched his head. "I guess that's true," he said. "I tried reasoning with them. I tried telling them how unsafe it was to dig such deep holes and not once did they explain themselves." He looked over at the boys sitting on top of the horse. "What about those two?" he asked. "They haven't said anything yet. Are they zombies?"

"Tell the man you aren't zombies," Ignatious said to Onus and Twig.

"Sir, we aren't zombies!" Twig shouted. "I promise!"

"We're lost and we're looking for a road map so we can get home!" Onus shouted.

"That's the truth," Ignatious said.

The man dropped the shovel. "Oh, dear goodness," he said. "It is so nice to see living people again."

Ignatious stepped back from the door allowing the man to open it. The man stepped through it and threw his arms around Ignatious, hugging him hard. Ignatious squirmed and fought to get loose from the man's grip, but the man wasn't letting go. "I never thought I'd see another human again," he cried. "You three are a sight for sore eyes and I really do have sore eyes, because some of the bear spray I sprayed at the zombies last night got caught in the wind and hit me. Boy oh boy did it hurt."

"Those weren't zombies," Onus said. "They were real, live people."

The man let go of Ignatious and walked over to Casper. He ran a hand along Casper's mane and looked up at Onus. "You didn't see them," he said. "Their eyes were blank. It

was that nothingness on their faces, and that inability to be affected by vast amounts of bear spray, that proved they weren't part of our living team. Scary stuff."

The man deserved an explanation, because Onus knew the truth about the zombies, but he also knew the man was set in his belief about what he saw. And when someone so strongly believes in something, it can be a futile and exhausting exercise trying to change his or her belief. "I'm sorry you had such a terrible night," Onus said, realizing his safest route with the man was to be sympathetic. "And I hope nothing like that ever happens to you again. I don't suppose your store has a map in it?"

"City? Province? Country? Or world map?" the man asked.

"We've travelled a great distance, but I really don't think we're out of our country," Onus said. "I think a provincial map would probably work."

The man ran into the gas station and disappeared through the back door he had first rushed out of. A few seconds later he reappeared holding a rectangular, folded map in his hand. He began unfolding it as he was pushing through the gas station's front door. He was still unfolding it when he reached Onus. He placed the map on the ground and finished unfolding it, then he placed a small rock on each of its corners so it wouldn't blow away if the wind came. It was the largest map Onus had ever seen. It was the largest map Twig had ever seen. The gas station man found a stick and pointed it at a spot on the map. "This spot here," he said, "is where you are now."

From high up on Casper's back, Onus could see his city on the map. He read it over and over again. Reading the eight-letter name of his city made his heart tingle. Reading the eight-letter name of his city made the homesickness he had been fighting off for so long, infect his body. He wasn't

a doctor, but he knew seeing his mother and father was the cure. "We're not far," he said. "It's about a man's foot to the right of where we are now. Less than a step!"

The gas-station man placed the heel of his foot on the spot of the map he had been pointing to and laid his foot flat, aiming it to the left. Written in big bold letters at the tip of his toe was the eight-letter city Onus had spoken of. "Well, I'll be," the man said and looked up at Onus. "You really aren't that far away. On horse back, I'd say four hours tops."

He placed his hand over his eyes like he was saluting Onus and slowly, he began to turn himself in a circle. A quarter of the way through the circumference of his circle he stopped and said, "Go that way." He pointed out at the barren land beyond his strange little town. "Go perfectly straight. If you don't veer off course, you should make it home before dinnertime."

"Thank you, sir," Onus said.

"Just watch out for them zombies," the gas-station man said. "If anything is going to make you veer off course, it's a zombie."

Onus smiled and thanked the man again. Twig smiled at the man and nodded his head, just like his father did when he wanted to show his gratitude to someone. Then Ignatious shook the man's hand and hopped onto Casper's back. "Next stop, home!" he hollered.

The boys clapped and cheered. And as Ignatious yelled "HeeYawww!" setting Casper in motion, the gas-station man joined in on their celebration. His hooting and hollering could be heard over Casper's galloping. Despite the jovial nature of the departure, none of the three on Casper's back looked behind. The time for looking behind them was over.

TWELVE

Dozens of deep dark holes littered the landscape. From a distance, the holes looked like bruises. Or giant periods misplaced from the giant sentences they were meant to close off. There were holes here. There were holes there. There were holes everywhere. Holes were dug into hills and into rock sheets. Holes were dug into marshes and forest floors. And everytime they neared one of these holes, Casper would slow down and step cautiously around it. And everytime they passed one of these holes, they would all look down the hole, searching for a bottom that could never be seen. On more than one occasion Twig was heard saying, "I sure would hate falling down one of these holes." And everyone would always nod their head in agreement with Twig's declaration, because really, who in their right mind would love falling down a deep dark hole? Hate is definitely a strong word when talking about how much one would dislike doing something, but hate was a fair word in this case. I've fallen down a deep dark hole and I know the pain and anguish it can cause. I don't just hate the thought of falling down a hole. I hate all holes: manholes, donut holes, holes in walls, holes on golf course greens, pinholes. All of them. And if that isn't bad enough, I shudder when I hear the word 'hole,' even when it's this 'whole.' So if someone says to me, "I want the whole piece

of pizza," I want to run and hide under my bed. But enough about my lingering issues.

After four hours of crossing the hole-riddled land, Onus, Twig, Ignatious and Casper came upon a sight that brought tears to two of their eyes. It was a totem pole that towered over trees and homes and hot-dog stands. A jackrabbit, a raccoon, a wolf, a bear and a family of squirrels was carved into the totem pole.

"I can't believe it," Onus said.

"I can't believe it, either," Twig said.

"What?" Ignatious asked. "What can't you believe?"

"We're home," the two boys said at the same time.

"Really?" Ignatious said.

Onus pointed at the totem pole. "That's The Welcoming Tree," he said. The people who used to live on this land, way before we did, built it to welcome travellers and wanderers. It also protects our homes from outside evils."

"Maybe that's the reason Fang chose Arugula and not our city to build his leg museum," Twig said.

"Maybe you're right, Twig," Onus said. "But you know what the best thing about The Welcoming Tree is?"

"It's just down the road from where you and I live," Twig said.

"Exactly," Onus said.

Ignatious let out a joyous laugh and said, "I don't think I've ever seen a more impressive welcoming committee in my entire life, partners." He tapped Casper on the side, moving the horse forward, and Onus and Twig finally closed in on the destination they once thought they'd never see again.

Had it been days? Weeks? Months? Time had ceased to exist since the day they left for Arugula in Clay's sidecar. Seeing the familiar all around them offered no hints of how long they had been gone. Nothing had changed. Children still played soccer on the local pitch (of course, their game came

to a halt when someone noticed the horse walking down the middle of the road), men and women holding hands still walked their dogs and their ferrets along sidewalks and forest paths. The roads still buzzed with cars and trucks and rickshaws carrying people toward that next minute...that next event in their lives.

But something amongst all the familiar did stand out. Something new and numerous. It was a sheet of paper stapled to every telephone pole. Most times, when a piece of paper is stapled to a telephone pole it is advertising a service no one needs, like LEARN TO ACT LIKE AN ORANGUTAN, or it will describe a person's LOST CAT or LOST DOG. But this particular piece of paper, told of two families' LOST SONS. When Onus recognized the two people in the two photos on this sheet of paper, he shouted, "Hold your horse! Hoooooldddddd your horse! Look Twig, it's us!"

Ignatious directed Casper over to the nearest telephone pole and they all looked at the sheet of paper stapled to it. In big black letters at the top of the sheet were the words LOST SONS. Underneath LOST SONS were last year's school photo of each boy. Under the photos were their names and what they were wearing when they disappeared. Under the school photos were the words BIG REWARD FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THEIR SAFE RETURN HOME. Under these words was a photo of a strange animal. Under this photo were the words, "And does anyone know what this is and who it belongs to?"

"How long have we been gone?" Twig asked.

"I just don't know," Onus said.

"Enough with the gawking," Ignatious said. "Looks like there are some mighty anxious parents waiting by the front window for their boys to come home. Time for me to put those parents' minds at ease."

The Livesay home was visible from where they had stopped. A block-and-a-half away at most. Onus saw his big tree in the front yard. It was still reaching for the moon. A river of memories rushed through him: hiding from his aunt's Doberman Pincher Sally, tying paper ghosts to the branches at Halloween, the first time he saw Isis after she turned purple. Something strange was standing next to his tree and the sight of it made all those memories suddenly fizz away. "Head for that big tree," he said.

Casper trotted forward. As they neared the tree, Onus and Twig recognized the strange thing next to it. "Gromley!" the boys yelled. Gromley the mox was head down, grazing on the Livesay's lawn. The mox paid no attention to their call. "Gromley!" they yelled again.

Casper came to a halt and Ignatious jumped off. He helped Onus and Twig to the ground and said, "Well then, this has been one strange and inspiring adventure, hasn't it?"

The boys ran to the mox and wrapped their arms around his fat neck. The mox paid no attention to the boys' affectionate gesture, choosing to continue his feast of front lawn instead. While the boys were distracted by their reunion with Gromley, Ignatious quietly climbed back onto Casper. If the boys had been looking, they would've seen the cowboy shedding a tear as he positioned himself for his ride into the unknown. Being a cowboy, though, Ignatious probably would have denied it was a tear, saying instead that an aphid had flown into his eye.

"Hey Ignatious," Onus said. "Come and meet Gromley. He's part moose and part ox."

"That makes him a mox," Twig said.

When Ignatious didn't answer, the boys looked up to see him and Caspar walking away from them. "Where are you going?" Onus shouted. His shouts caused a fluttering of living-room curtains.

A moment later the Livesay's front door swung open and a tearful song of "Oh my...baby. Oh my...alive. Oh my...life can go on," echoed down the road.

Ignatious smiled. "You're home, partners," he said. "Never take your homes for granted. They give so much back to you."

"But I want you to come in for dinner," Onus said. "I want to tell my parents that you saved us."

Onus knew his parents were running toward him. His heart was beating a zillion beats a minute. The anticipation of seeing them again was almost too much to bear, but he couldn't let his new friend Ignatious disappear from his life. The two of them had been through too much to let it end so easily.

"I didn't save you, Onus," Ignatious said. "I just brought you home. In reality, you two saved me. And I will never forget that."

"Oh my...I never thought this day would come." The voice was his mother's. It was the most beautiful voice Onus had ever heard. "Oh my...can it really be true?"

"But where are you going to go?" Twig asked.

"I'm going home," he said. "I left it in a bit of a mess and I think it's time I get back and clean it up properly. I'll never forget the two of you, and that is the truth."

"I can't believe it!" It really tr...truely is!" This time, it was Onus's father's voice that echoed down the road. His father's tune was wobblier than his mother's. It cracked in certain places, too. But it was just as beautiful.

And before Onus and Twig could say a proper "good bye" to their new friend, they were snatched up in a parental embrace so fierce it lifted them up off their feet and spun them around in circles. As they spun, they caught glimpses of the cowboy and his horse riding off into the sunset. They tried to yell "Good bye. We'll never forget about you either,"

but their farewell call was incomprehensible.

When the spinning stopped and the spinning of the world stopped a few moments later, the boys were once again embraced. Onus's mother smelled like daisies and blueberries. He inhaled a deep breath and said, "Please don't ever let me go."

All four of them were crying. The tears and joyful cries brought more people from around the neighbourhood onto their front lawns. Another song of disbelief and unrelenting joy echoed down the road. Twig broke free of Onus's father's embrace.

"Mom!" he yelled. "Mom, it's me! I'm here and I'm one-hundred percent normal! I can see! I don't have swan lice anymore! And I'm no longer weird!"

Twig ran off to be a part of his own reunion, surely just as joyful and tearful as Onus's reunion with his parents.

Onus's father wrapped his arms around him and his mother. Onus had never felt so safe in all his life. He had never felt so loved. His mother ran her hand through his hair and said, "We were beginning to doubt this day would ever happen."

"We had become robots, son," his father said. "Functioning, but emotionless robots. Our reason for caring...for living was gone."

"We are alive again," his mother said.

"Alive," Onus repeated and cried.

Onus sat on the edge of his bed and half-heartedly bounced up and down on the soft mattress. It seemed like a thousand years since he had last been in his bedroom. And as any ten-year-old boy knows, a thousand years feels more like a million years. He had to take it all in again. Process things and refamiliarize himself with them. His surroundings, so familiar, yet so foreign. His surroundings, so safe and

unassuming. Toys lined his shelves. Not human legs. The stuffed animals piled up in the chair in the corner of his room were never alive. They were made of cotton and plastic. Not plasticized skin and bones. The only way the broken mirror on his desk would ever be fixed was if it was replaced. It was all the way the world was supposed to be, yet he knew life would never be the same again, because he had seen the other side. He knew the world wasn't as pretty and safe as his parents and his teachers tried to make it out to be. He knew that there were bad people and bad things out there that wanted to hurt him. That wanted to turn him purple. And he now knew that when people turned purple, they weren't coming back. They were dead. Purple equalled permanent. He wished he didn't know these things yet, because it meant he had to accept the tragedy that had befallen his twin sister Isis. He had to accept that she was dead and life really wouldn't ever be the same for him or his family again. It was a lot for one ten year old to handle.

And as Onus bounced at the end of his bed trying in vain to stop the tears from falling, a comforting chill filled the room. It wrapped itself around him like a swan-feather-filled comforter and it squeezed him tight. He shivered and let loose the tears he had been trying so hard to hold back. "I really miss you, Isis," he said.

The chill that was wrapped around him materialized into his twin sister. She was sitting next to him at the end of his bed, her ghostly arm wrapped around his shoulders. "I really miss you, too, Goobles," she said. "But it's time for both you and I to move on."

"Move on!" Onus said. "What are you trying to say?"

Isis smiled at her little brother, little only by the thirty-three minutes that separated them at birth. And in those thirty-three long minutes, Isis took on the role of big,

protective sister. "When I return, I have to renegotiate my contract. I think my time down here is coming to a permanent end."

"No, Icy!" Onus cried. "You said you'd be there to help me out whenever I was in trouble. You said!"

"I have learned a lot in my time up there where people go when they turn purple," Isis said. "I have learned that the biggest part of life is death. It is even bigger than choosing a dog or buying a new bike. But death is not a bad thing, Onus. It really isn't. It is just the next stage in our being. Some of us just get to that stage a little earlier than others. And everyone meets up again at some point and it's like no time has passed at all. And it is good. But Onus, you must live this stage of your being to its fullest. You must experience all that this stage has to offer. And you must do it on your own. You must! Look at the world you live in."

"This world full of bad things and bad people that want to hurt me?"

"No," Isis said sharply. "This world of mountains and lakes and ice-cream cones and good books and movie-theatre popcorn. Yes, the world has bad things in it and yes, you now know that. But the world has so much more good in it. And you can't let the bad stop you from wanting to experience the world and all that life has to offer you."

"But how am I supposed to experience it and enjoy it when I'm alone? When you're not here to experience it with me?"

"But Onus, you aren't alone. You have mom and dad. You have..." Isis let go of her brother and floated up off the bed toward Onus's bedroom window. "Come here, little brother."

Onus joined Isis at the window and looked out at his backyard. Beyond his backyard was the Loman's backyard. And sitting in a hole-riddled patio chair in the Loman's

backyard was little Twig Loman. He was looking up at the sky and smiling. "Twig will always be there for you, Onus. The two of you have shared experiences which have bonded you for life...which have made you like brothers. And you know what? Twig needs a brother," Isis said. "He needs someone to continue to protect him and help him along on his journey through this life. He needs you and you need him."

"I know," Onus said.

Isis reached out and grabbed Onus's hand. Onus felt skin and warmth. Onus felt life. He squeezed his sister's soft hand and together they looked out the window and up at the sky. A cloud shaped like a Great Dane with wings floated by. "If I'm ever allowed to get a dog, I think I know what kind I'd choose," Onus said. Suddenly, everything was the way it was supposed to be. And it would stay that way forevermore.

EPILOGUE

When it was clear the story Mr. Flex wanted to tell was done, I said, "I know you are the bi-plane pilot, Mr. Flex. The initials R.E.F. The peanut-buttery smell. It is all so obvious. But you still haven't told me who you are in relation to anyone else in your story and you still haven't told me how you ended up in this hole."

"If you can put all of that together," Mr. Flex replied, "then I am one-hundred percent sure you can figure out who I really am if you just think about it a little longer."

A current of nerves ran through my body. The space Mr. Flex took up at the bottom of the hole proved that he was a large man, but the darkness engulfing us never allowed me to see just how large he really was. For a moment a dreadful thought crossed my mind. Was I sitting in a deep dark hole with the villain Fang? My silence spoke a thousand words.

Mr. Flex chuckled. "Just remember this, my friend," he said. "We can't choose our family, but sometimes our family can choose us. And sometimes youth and fear and loneliness cloud our perception of those people we come to call family. When I grew up, my cloud disappeared and I was finally able to see the truth of my situation. I spent my adult life foiling that truth any way I could."

"Are you..."

"I am a bi-plane pilot who came out of one cloud and flew into another," he continued. "I knew Sarah would be able to help them. I knew it because she had helped me so many times before. My intention was to return to the asylum and finish things once and for all."

"Finish things?"

"I flew into the cloud above Sarah's cabin and a few too many fat raindrops got into my engine. The propeller stopped spinning and my nose dipped. I lost control of the plane. I lost...control." Mr. Flex stopped speaking and took a deep breath. When he had composed himself, he continued on with his personal tale of survival. "The loop-de-loops I was suddenly doing were no longer enjoyable because I had nothing to do with them. The freefall made my heart race for all the wrong reasons. And then my strange, lonely life passed before my eyes: the hiking trips, the days making peanut butter, the awkward introductions, the secret basements...the confrontation. And just as I was about to smash into the ground, I instinctively gave the dashboard one last boot. That boot was the best thing I ever did. That boot saved my life. It loosened enough juice to fill the engine and give the propeller the life it needed to let me pull the plane out of its dive and coast it to a more survivable crash. I crashed about a kilometre from here. And boy was it a crash! I couldn't get the landing wheels down, so when the belly of my plane hit the ground, the whole thing flipped onto its back. During the flip, the top wing tore right off the plane. The plane then split in half just behind my seat. When the still spinning propeller hit the ground, it broke free of the nose and spun deep into the dirt, shredding the roots and the buried sacks of pennies that got in its way. And through it all, my eyelids kept fluttering. My heart kept beating. My muscles kept twitching. Somehow, I kept living. After several long minutes of pinching myself just to make sure I was still

alive, I unbuckled my seatbelt and fell to the ground. My crash to the ground was far less dramatic than my plane's crash. There was a "hmmpp" and an "ouch" but I didn't lose any parts. I got to my feet and checked myself over for any bones sticking out or broken gear sticks penetrating my skin. I was untouched. Not a scratch. I didn't know where I was or what to do, so I ran."

"You had just been in a terrible plane crash and you ran?"

"I just wanted to find someone who could point me home. I had become so focussed on foiling Fang's plans, I had lost myself. When my life had passed before my eyes, it became abundantly clear what I wanted...no, needed to do with my life. And it had nothing to do with vengeance or ridding myself of resentment. So I ran and I ran and I ran, and then the world dropped out from under me. Literally. I was so busy looking to my left and to my right and straight ahead of me that I missed this big ol' hole."

The smelly, strange man sitting across from me at the bottom of the deep dark hole sighed. So much had happened to Onus and Twig during their journey that a sigh seemed a fitting way to end it. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized the sigh wasn't a sigh of relief that Onus and Twig's story was over, but a sigh of sadness, because Mr. Flex's story was suddenly cut short by a fall into a hole.

"We're going to get out of here," I said.

"With every passing minute, that gets harder and harder to believe."

"Now who's being a pessemist?" I said and chuckled. He did not laugh at my allusion to his past story. So I continued speaking, this time in a more serious manner. "I am fascinated by your story, Mr. Flex," I said. "For now, let's just say we do get out of here. What happens next? Will you tell me the rest of your story? I know it hasn't

happened yet, but I can tell you know what you want to happen...and I want to hear it."

"It is a most wonderful story," Mr. Flex said. Even in the dark I could tell he was smiling. "My voice is a little hoarse right now, though. Maybe tomorrow I'll share it with you. Maybe tomorrow."

"I'd like that," I said.

After a few minutes of silence I picked up the comb buzzer I had cobbled together with my pocket lint and the comb that was missing three teeth, and I began to sing through it. "Come back," I sang. "Please come back to me."

Christopher Millin is the author of *The King of Arugula, Fowl, Swine and Things That Send Shivers Down Your Spine* and *The Healing Sand*. When he's not writing, he's publishing **Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine**, an arts and literature magazine for children, and he's talking about the 80s on *Neon City*, a late-night community radio show in Penticton, BC.



The Healing Sand

Onus and Twig have inadvertently ruined another of William Ernest Fang's elaborate plans and have left the villain trapped under a giant stuffed bear named Gertrude. Thanks to a promise from a tiny farmer, and a scent-tracking mox named Gromley, the boys believe they are finally on their way home. But as we have learned over and over again in **THE HOLE STORIES**, home isn't always the easiest place to get to. And so, a chance encounter with a broken man leads Onus and Twig to a strange town that is hiding two very big secrets. One: the town possesses a magical sand that fixes broken things and is only spoken about in urban legends. And two: the sand, which is used for so much good, has a dark side to it that no one wants to acknowledge...a dark side that may keep Onus and Twig from ever getting home.