

# ***Look Both Ways: A Tale Told in Ten Blocks* — Chapter Synopses**

## **Chapter 1: "Water Booger Bears"**

The novel opens at the end of the school day at Latimer Middle School, where best friends **Jasmine Jordan** and **Terrence "TJ" Jumper** leave their last class together. Their friendship stretches back six years — since they were both six years old and the only two children living on their block, Marston Street. From the very first moments, their dynamic is clear: playful, warm, and deeply loyal.

Jasmine immediately teases TJ about the boogers visible in his nose, and TJ responds not with embarrassment but with enthusiasm, launching into a detailed explanation of what boogers actually are. He has done research. Boogers, he explains, are basically water and dust — and since human beings are themselves mostly made of water and, according to religious text, created from the dust of the earth, that means humans are essentially boogers too. It is a wild, ridiculous theory, and Jasmine laughs in spite of herself, which is exactly what TJ intends.

The narrative pauses here to give the reader crucial context about Jasmine's life. This has been an extraordinarily difficult school year for her. Her parents recently separated, and her father left the family home. In the aftermath of that upheaval, Jasmine's **sickle cell anemia** — a blood disease she has lived with since birth that can affect organs, joints, and even vision — flared severely. Her hands and feet became swollen, and her muscles felt, as the text describes, like they had become wood. She was unable to return to school for an entire month. She has only been back for two days, and already she is grappling with how to catch up on an overwhelming backlog of work.

TJ has done small, thoughtful things to help her feel less alone during her absence — the most touching being his habit of sliding empty snack bags through the vent of her locker between classes while she was gone, so she would return to a locker full of what they call "friendship flags." These small pieces of litter, covered in Cheeto dust, are their way of saying *I've missed you*.

As the two begin their walk home together, they move through the neighborhood surrounding the school, eventually turning onto Marston Street, which Jasmine describes as lined with houses old enough to look lived-in — a mix of brick and vinyl, bay windows and Colonial style, grass and gravel and pavement. There is warmth in Jasmine's description, a sense of belonging.

The philosophical debate about boogers continues. TJ compares something their science teacher taught them to his "old mother" — a former foster parent — and then quickly corrects

himself, referring to Ms. Macy, his adoptive mother of six years, as his "new mother." The mention of his former foster parent causes him to shudder, as though something cold has passed through him, but he does not dwell on it.

Jasmine refuses to accept TJ's claim that she is a booger. Instead, she proposes that she is more like a **water bear** — a microscopic animal they studied in science class, technically known as a tardigrade, renowned for being among the toughest living creatures in the known universe. They can survive extreme temperatures, radiation, even the vacuum of space. Jasmine admires the water bear precisely because of its ability to endure impossible conditions. She identifies with it.

TJ, for his part, is unsettled by the water bear. Jasmine notices that he seems genuinely freaked out by the idea of something invisible that cannot be smashed or smeared or destroyed. TJ is comforted by control, by being able to physically act on the world around him. The invisible frightens him precisely because there is nothing he can do about it.

They eventually reach TJ's house — small and wooden, built, Jasmine imagines, not by machines but by human hands, love, hammers, nails, and more love. They sit together on the porch steps and continue their debate until, finally, they arrive at a compromise. Maybe they are both. Maybe a person can be a water bear *and* a booger at the same time. They coin a new term together: **water booger bears**. It is silly, and it is perfect, and it captures something true about both of them — and about humanity itself.

## Chapter 2: "The Low Cuts Strike Again"

Chapter 2 introduces one of the novel's most memorable groups: **the Low Cuts**, consisting of **Britton "Bit" Burns**, **John John Watson**, **Francy Baskin**, and **Trista Smith**. Their reputation at Latimer Middle School precedes them. They are known for stealing — specifically, for stealing anything that jingles. Teachers are concerned about them. Students keep their distance. They are the kids that everyone has already made up their minds about.

The narrator, however, immediately begins complicating that picture. The Low Cuts, we learn, do not steal for fun. They steal because they have to. They are all on free lunch because their families cannot afford the extra expense. And they are united by something even more specific and painful: every single one of them has a parent who is a cancer survivor. They met in a school support group, where Bit explained to the others how the surgeries and treatments their parents underwent had knocked everything off track financially — the medical bills, the missed work, the cascading costs of serious illness. In a gesture of solidarity, the four of them cut their hair, matching the hair loss their parents experienced during chemotherapy. And they agreed: they would only steal loose change.

The chapter picks up after school. The Low Cuts gather at their usual meeting spot — a bench outside the school doors — and Bit presides over the group with an authority that has nothing to do with his size. Bit is, as the text describes, "the tiniest person in their crew," but he more than compensates with confidence and a sharp temper. He defends the other Low Cuts when anyone dares to tease them — the one exception being Trista, who has martial arts training and a tongue sharp enough to handle herself just fine.

The group counts their combined haul for the day: ninety cents in loose change. Bit announces their mission and leads them out into the neighborhood with a purpose he has not yet revealed to the reader.

Their first stop is the home of **Ms. CeeCee**, the neighborhood candy lady. There is no corner store within five blocks, so Ms. CeeCee has stepped into the gap, selling candy to the neighborhood children from her home. She is elderly and good-natured, and she sells the Low Cuts eighteen pieces of old-school candy — the kind she remembers from her own youth — for their ninety cents.

Bit then leads the group to a **pool hall on Placer Street**. This is where the reader begins to understand what Bit is doing: he intends to resell the candy at a markup to the older men inside. The pool hall is full of men who look, to John John, Francy, and Trista, like bigger, older versions of Bit — hustlers who built lives out of making something from nothing.

When the old men inside tell the kids to leave, it is Bit who steps up. There is something different in his voice in that moment — harder, sharper — something his friends have never quite heard before. He holds his ground. One by one, the Low Cuts join in, and the old men, perhaps recognizing something of themselves in these children, buy the candy. Nostalgia does the work. The group sells everything and walks out with nine dollars.

They run to catch the neighborhood **ice cream truck** before it completes its route. They make it just in time and purchase four vanilla soft-serve cones with sprinkles. But here is where the chapter's final misdirect lands: the group does not eat the ice cream. They run, holding their cones carefully, to Bit's house.

Bit calls for his mother to come outside. Her cancer has come back, he explains quietly. Today was her first day back on chemotherapy. He asks how she is feeling. She says her stomach is a little queasy. And Bit tells her that he and his friends got her something — four vanilla soft-serve ice creams, because it is one of the few things that might sit well.

The reader — and the Low Cuts — watches Bit the hustler become, in that moment, simply a son. A scared son. A son who loves his mother.

## Chapter 3: "Skitter Hitter"

Chapter 3 is told through a third-person omniscient narrator and follows two characters on parallel journeys that briefly, violently intersect: **Pia Foster**, a quiet skateboarder at Latimer Middle School, and **Stevie Munson**, a private school student at the nearby Brookshire Boys Academy.

The chapter opens with the narrator musing about what both characters might have done differently if they had known what the afternoon held. This creates an immediate sense of foreboding.

Pia is a skateboarder above all else. Her board is named **Skitter**, and she refers to it as "she." Skating, for Pia, is freedom — the one place where she does not have to be careful or quiet or contained. She spends most of her classes daydreaming about skating tricks, scribbling her sister's name — **Santi** — on her desk. The mention of Santi is layered with grief from the start. The reader understands early that something has happened to her, though the full details are withheld.

Pia has noticed another girl skateboarder named **Fawn Samms** — the only other girl skater she knows and respects — but has held back from approaching her. Connection feels risky for Pia.

Meanwhile, at Brookshire Boys Academy, **Stevie Munson** dreads the end of every school day because it means leaving the relative safety of the building. A baseball player named **Marcus Bradford** has been tormenting Stevie relentlessly, writing humiliating things on the back of Stevie's shirt almost every day. Stevie says nothing about it to anyone, especially not his mother, who sacrifices enormously to pay his private school tuition. He cannot bear to disappoint her.

The backstory between Pia and Marcus is revealed in pieces. Marcus's mother owns the hair salon Pia's mother takes her to. Once, while waiting at the salon, Pia skated in the parking lot. Marcus came out, asked to try her board, slipped, and fell — his pants splitting open to reveal superhero underwear. Pia tried to help him up, but the humiliation was complete. He avoided her after that. Until, years later, she was at the salon getting her hair done for her **sister's funeral**.

In the present, Pia is skating home when she passes Marcus and his crew in a park. Marcus, spotting her, gives Stevie an ultimatum: steal Pia's skateboard, or the bullying continues. Stevie feels sick but says nothing.

The boys form a wall across Pia's path. She stops and looks each one directly in the face — calm, unflinching. Stevie cannot meet her eyes. When Marcus grabs for Skitter, Pia refuses to let go. He shoves her to the ground. The skateboard flies from her hands into the street, where a passing car rolls directly over it, splitting it in two.

Pia runs. In those moments of flight, she thinks of Santi — how Santi was also pushed off her skateboard by a boy, a boy jealous of how well she skated. That push sent Santi into oncoming traffic. The full weight of Pia's grief, and its terrible circularity, crashes into the reader all at once.

Stevie watches Pia disappear, then walks into the street — halting traffic with a timid raised hand — and picks up the two broken halves of the skateboard. He holds them, the text tells us, like a broken heart. He asks himself why he didn't say anything. Why he didn't stop it.

That night, Stevie tells his mother everything — the bullying, the incident with Pia's board, all of it. The next day, his mother pulls him from school early and drives him to Latimer to find Pia and apologize. But Pia, in the meantime, has finally reached out to Fawn. The two girls leave school together through the back door, walking to the cemetery to visit Santi's grave. Stevie and Pia never connect — but both of them have already begun to change.

## Chapter 4: "How to Look (Both) Both Ways"

Chapter 4 introduces **Fatima Moss**, a methodical and anxious girl who narrates her own story in first person. Fatima has developed an elaborate system for navigating her walk home from school: she documents everything. How many steps it takes to get from one place to another. What has changed since the day before. What has stayed the same. She counts, measures, records. Even on a one-way street, she looks both ways.

Her notebook is her most prized possession and her primary defense against a world that feels dangerously unpredictable. Her mother is an environmental scientist who taught Fatima to document the world systematically, and Fatima has taken this lesson and applied it to her own emotional survival. Her father is a flight attendant — often absent — and the house is empty after school. Fatima likes it that way. She pretends to be a flight attendant like her father, moving through the rooms of the house, narrating.

The origin of Fatima's system is explained in a flashback. On her very first day walking home from school, she tripped over a crack in the sidewalk and fell hard on the pavement, struggling to get back up while a school bus full of her classmates passed and the kids inside laughed at her. It was mortifying. Except for one boy: a kid with thick ropes of hair, like antennae, who was sitting in the bus with a notebook covering his face — not laughing, not watching, just hiding behind his notebook, the same way Fatima would eventually learn to hide behind hers.

Then **Benni Austin** appeared. Benni is a grown woman who moves through the world as though she has no awareness of how she appears to others — bopping down the sidewalk, pumping her arms as though playing an enormous invisible drum set, singing old songs as if they were brand new. She screamed once and made Fatima flinch, then immediately stopped, her face going loose and sloshy with concern. Benni handed Fatima an umbrella on a rainy day and played it like a guitar.

Fatima did not tell her mother about Benni, for fear she would be required to take a different route home and lose her prized after-school independence. Instead, she began using a notebook — inspired both by her mother's scientific methods and by the boy on the bus with his notebook — to record and predict her daily experiences. She quickly discovered something paradoxical: Benni, who changes entirely from day to day, is also the most reliably present thing on Fatima's walk.

In the present day, Benni walks with Fatima and begins screaming a repeated question: "*How you gon' change the world? How you gon' change the world?*" Fatima ignores her, until Benni stops walking entirely and asks one more time, with genuine seriousness.

Fatima has a homework assignment sitting in her bag asking her to write about *being* — what she would want to be. Standing there with Benni, she begins to understand her answer. She wants to be wet cement, she thinks, to fill the cracks in the sidewalk — not to hide, but to stop someone else from tripping. Or maybe she would be an umbrella, keeping rain from someone's head.

The chapter ends with Fatima asking to borrow one of Benni's imaginary instruments.

## Chapter 5: "Call of Duty"

Chapter 5 begins the morning after a violent fight, following **Bryson Wills** as he stays home from school to recover. His face is a catalog of injuries — black eye, busted lip, swollen jaw, scrapes. His parents have told him to rest, and his mother has specifically asked him not to spend the whole day playing video games. He immediately begins playing video games.

Bryson is attempting to escape, to not think about what happened. But the thoughts come anyway. He replays the shaky footage he saw circulating on social media — footage of himself throwing punches, struggling to stay on his feet, fighting off multiple attackers. He deleted all the apps at his mother's request. The game helps, but not enough.

The chapter then shifts to **Ty Carson** at school that day, navigating the hallways under the weight of a rumor. People keep looking away when he catches their eyes. Conversations cut off when he approaches. He feels like a human mute button. Ty is the best gamer at Latimer Middle School — something that has always given him a kind of status — and he is also privately at war with himself, trying to make sense of his feelings about his own sexual orientation.

The events of the previous day are unspooled gradually. Ty was **kissed by a boy named Slim** during a minor argument over water. It was unexpected, sudden, and meaningful to Ty in ways he cannot yet articulate. But Slim, frightened by the reaction of witnesses, reversed the story and told everyone that Ty had kissed *him*. The rumor spread fast.

Bryson heard the rumor from another boy, who repeated it with cruelty. Bryson's response was simple: "*Why you care so much?*" Then he went to the cafeteria, where he found Ty surrounded by a crowd calling him names — names, the text says, that bite, that stick and mark, that catch fire and leave a burnt smell in the air. Bryson sat down next to Ty. And then, to demonstrate the absurdity of what everyone was making such a fuss about, he kissed Ty on the cheek.

That gesture of solidarity — tender, brave, and entirely uncomplicated in Bryson's mind — exploded the rumor even further, placing both boys at its center. Bryson walked home after school knowing that Slim and some of the other boys were following him. He turned around, put his hands up, and did his best. He was jumped by four boys and beaten.

Now, the next day, Ty is at school trying to hold himself together while Bryson is at home with his video games. When Ty learns what happened to Bryson, he doesn't hesitate. He runs — directly from school to Bryson's house — stopping only to grab a fistful of roses from someone's garden, the thorns pressing into his fingers and palm the whole way. He rings Bryson's doorbell. Bryson, surprised, invites him in.

The chapter closes on the two of them standing in the doorway, and Ty understanding that there are things they need to talk about, and things that don't need to be said, and a lot of both in the space between them.

## Chapter 6: "Five Things Easier to Do Than Simeon's and Kenzi's Secret Handshake"

Chapter 6 is structured as a numbered list — five items, each one easier than the enormously complex secret handshake shared by **Simeon Cross** and **Kenzi Thompson**. Each item on the list serves as a heading for a section of the chapter, and together they trace the boys' afternoon from the end of the school day to the steps of their apartment building.

**Item 1: Getting through the crowded hallways after the bell rings.** Simeon Cross is one of the biggest kids at Latimer Middle School — impossible to miss, impossible not to miss when absent. His friend Kenzi Thompson is one of the smallest, unremarkable to look at, easy to overlook. In the crush of the end-of-day hallway rush, Kenzi gets shoved and jostled. His solution: he waits in his last classroom until Simeon comes to collect him, then climbs onto Simeon's back, arms around his neck — tight enough to hold on, not tight enough to choke — and they move through the hallway together.

**Item 2: Getting out of trouble with Ms. Wockley for pretending to be in a horse race.** Ms. Wockley catches them in the hallway, Kenzi on Simeon's back, and scolds them. The boys argue back — not rudely, but entertainingly, explaining their reasoning with such charm and good humor that Ms. Wockley lets them repeat the whole story even though she already knows it, because, the text notes, they are always so entertaining.

**Item 3: Walking to their neighborhood.** Simeon and Kenzi both live in **Chestnut Homes**, a neighborhood with a bad reputation. Most of their classmates who live there take different routes home or get rides. Simeon and Kenzi walk there proudly. To everyone else, Chestnut Street is a place to tighten up and move quickly. To Simeon and Kenzi, it is a kingdom, a paradise — a place where they can let loose. The neighborhood smells like exhaust and exhaustion, the text says, and the boys are princes no one ever bet on.

**Item 4: Picking the perfect snack from Fredo's Corner Store.** Fredo, the store owner, jokes with the boys in the barbed way of adults who underestimate children — suggesting he's waiting to see their faces in the newspaper for something bad. Kenzi announces he wants to be a big-time lawyer someday. Simeon says he wants to be a famous actor, specifically so he can *act* like a big-time lawyer. When Fredo makes a cutting remark about Kenzi's brother — referencing the handball Kenzi always carries, saying his brother was no good at the game anyway — Simeon slams his hand on the counter. When Fredo then turns his mockery toward Simeon's size, Kenzi takes Fredo's newspaper and lighter, and the two boys run out of the store. It is, as the narrator notes, a silly thing to steal from someone who owns a store full of newspapers and lighters. But it is about the principle. The loyalty. The brotherhood.

**Item 5: Making wishes.** Simeon and Kenzi settle outside their apartment building. Simeon uses the stolen lighter and newspaper to fashion a makeshift candle, which he sticks into the MoonPie he bought at Fredo's store. He sings happy birthday to Kenzi. Kenzi points out that it is not his birthday. Simeon tells him to blow out the candle anyway and make a wish. They share

the MoonPie. Then, finally, they perform their **secret handshake** — an elaborate, intricate routine they have learned from their older brothers.

And here, in the final pages, the weight behind the chapter settles in. Simeon looks at Kenzi and knows what he wished for. Kenzi's older brother **Mason** is in jail. He took the blame for a car theft that was actually committed by Simeon's older brother **Chucky**. Mason has been incarcerated for two years. Kenzi carries Mason's blue handball everywhere he goes, waiting for the day his brother can come home and teach him how to play.

## Chapter 7: "Satchmo's Master Plan"

Chapter 7 is centered entirely on **Satchmo Jenkins** and the elaborate mental architecture he has constructed around a single fear: dogs.

The chapter opens with a flashback to the incident that started it all. Satchmo was seven years old, known for his ability to catch anything thrown to him — never missing. One day, a football sailed into the yard of a neighbor named Ms. Adams, where her rottweiler, **Brutus**, was chained to a tree. Ms. Adams was an older woman who kept watch from her window over her yard. Satchmo checked that she wasn't watching, slipped in, grabbed the ball, held it up in triumph — and then Brutus broke free from his chain. He chased Satchmo and bit him in the back of the leg, leaving a scar in the shape of a sad face, the marks like Morse code pressed into his skin.

Four years later, Satchmo and his mother have moved to a new neighborhood for her new job at a veterinary clinic. His mother has made numerous attempts to help Satchmo overcome his fear of dogs — logical explanations, careful introductions to small animals. None of it has resolved the deep-body terror that larger dogs trigger in him. He manages small dogs, he says — as long as they are no bigger than a football. Bigger dogs are another matter entirely.

For a while, his new neighborhood was safe. No dogs on his route home. And then his neighbor **Mr. Jerry** — a widower whose wife recently died, and who had taken Satchmo's mother's suggestion to adopt a dog for companionship — got a dog. Satchmo learned this and immediately began developing escape plans.

The bulk of the chapter follows Satchmo's walk home the next day, rendered in a stream of consciousness that Reynolds marks with italics and fragmented, multi-line sentences — mimicking the frantic, erratic rhythm of Satchmo's panic. He talks himself through scenario after scenario: what to do if the dog is in the yard, if the gate is open, if it barks, if it doesn't bark but is watching. Every contingency is accounted for. He refers to his plan as his **master plan** — the plan to save his life.

He crosses to the other side of the street as he approaches Mr. Jerry's house. He watches the house. He almost makes it.

Then Mr. Jerry calls out to him. He is kneeling behind the fence, petting his new dog, whose tongue is lapping at the old man's face — warm and sloppy and entirely content. The dog is not vicious. It is not Brutus. It is just a dog, delighted to exist.

The chapter ends exactly there, on that image — Satchmo confronted not with the monster his imagination built, but with the loving, ordinary reality of Mr. Jerry's new companion. What Satchmo does next is left to the reader's imagination.

## Chapter 8: "Ookabooka Land"

Chapter 8 belongs to **Cynthia "Say So" Sower**, a girl who has made comedy her life's mission. Every day, for the last five minutes of math class, Cynthia performs a stand-up set for her classmates. Her teacher, Mrs. Stevens, allows it — partly as a management strategy, partly because she genuinely enjoys it, the jokes reminding her of old comedians from the black-and-white television programs her grandmother used to watch.

Cynthia was named after her grandfather, **Cinder**, whose real name is also Cynthia, but who has always been called Cinder. He ran a liquor store and held court from the middle of it, flipping a wooden crate upside down to use as a makeshift stage, telling jokes while his customers laughed. He was, as the text describes, both a hardheaded, hardhanded, hardtalking man and soft enough to hold baby Cynthia and stare at her and laugh like she was the greatest joke ever told. He gave her the nickname "Say So" for her constant, noisy babbling.

Cinder was in love with a **gray-haired, lipstick-wearing, cigarette-smoking mail carrier named Miss Fran**, who laughed at all his jokes and used to stick stamps on baby Cynthia's cheeks and forehead and threaten to mail her to the imaginary **Ookabooka Land**. When Cynthia was seven, Miss Fran died. The grief broke something in Cinder. He sold the liquor store. The building was torn down and replaced with a playground, and on that playground a small stage was erected with a plaque honoring Cinder's wooden crate — it was named **Cinder's Block**.

Cinder began to forget things. How to turn on the radio. How to use the microwave. The forgetting grew worse. Cynthia and her mother moved into his apartment to take care of him, sharing a single bedroom, Cynthia often sleeping on the couch.

Cynthia's mother is her hero — hardworking, devoted, overwhelmed — but too busy and exhausted for laughter. Cynthia's greatest dream is to make her mother laugh. In the meantime, she settles for her classmates.

In the present chapter, Cynthia has distributed hand-drawn flyers for a comedy show at Cinder's Block scheduled for **3:33 PM**. She takes a shortcut home to get there in time, and the shortcut runs through a cemetery. She pauses at **Miss Fran's grave** and finds a cigarette butt with lipstick on the end — she takes it for her grandfather's collection.

She arrives at Cinder's Block at 3:31 PM. There is only one small girl in the playground. By 3:33, no one else has come. This, Cynthia acknowledges, is fairly normal. People have other things to do. Or they think the oddly specific time is part of the joke. The real reason for 3:33 is something Cynthia has never told anyone: she chooses it in the hope that one day her mother might decide to skip her evening class, take a break, and come watch. The show starts at 3:33 because that is the earliest her mother could possibly make it.

Before leaving, Cynthia writes down the new jokes she worked out while watching a pigeon in the playground. She places the jokes in an envelope and stamps it. She stamps the small girl's hand on the way out, just as Miss Fran used to stamp hers.

Upstairs in the apartment, she finds Cinder at his desk, scribbling in a notepad, paper balls scattered across the floor. She recognizes her own handwriting on some of them — old envelopes she has given him before. She presents him with Miss Fran's cigarette butt. He adds it to the bottle where he keeps his collection. She gives him the new "mail." He tells her he is writing her some new jokes.

Cynthia knows how this will go: he will read the envelope later, forget that he read it, and come to believe that he wrote the jokes himself. And Cynthia will take those jokes to school, make her classmates laugh, come home, and tell him his jokes are still cracking people up. It is a fiction she constructs for him out of love — a way to give him back his purpose, his legacy, his sense of self. They end the chapter by invoking Ookabooka Land, and both of them break open with laughter.

## Chapter 9: "How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire"

Chapter 9 is the comic relief chapter of the novel, though it carries its own quiet tenderness underneath the humor. It follows **Gregory Pitts** and his crew — **Remar "Remy" Vaughn**, **Joey Santiago**, and **Candace Green** — on a mission of romantic ambition.

Gregory, his friends inform him, smells like his body has mistaken its organs for garbage. They tell him this, the narrator notes, out of love. And because today is the day Gregory has decided to tell **Sandra White** that he likes her, his friends have assembled an intervention.

The crew walks toward **Rogers Street**, where Sandra lives, rather than their usual route home. Along the way, Remy produces his older brother's body spray and applies it generously to Gregory, though the spray turns out to smell like a combination of burnt flowers and burnt rubber. It is not an improvement.

Candace produces a large bottle of her mother's lotion and applies it to Gregory's arms and face with methodical care — circles with the center of her palm, then pincher-claw rubs with the tips of her fingers for, as she describes it, optimal moisturizing. A school bus pulls up while she is mid-application and the kids inside mock Gregory. The crew turns in unison and confronts the bus.

Joey is next. He pulls out a ziplock bag of what he describes as lip balm — essential, he explains, for someone who might be kissed for the first time today. He warns Gregory to take it easy with the application. Gregory, nervous and eager, slaps the entire glob onto his lips and rubs it in. His lips immediately begin to burn. The crew discovers that Joey has brought not Vaseline but **VapoRub** — the medicated chest rub. Joey's reasoning: it has Vaseline in it, so he figured it was basically the same thing. Gregory's lips are on fire.

Despite everything — the cloud of burnt-flower body spray, the over-moisturized skin, the burning lips — the crew pushes Gregory forward. They tell him they believe in him. They tell him Sandra will too.

They arrive at Sandra's house. Gregory mounts the steps, rings the doorbell, and when Sandra appears, he reads from a prepared note, listing the things he likes about her. Sandra moves closer, looking at him curiously, asking about his appearance. He tells her it is hard to explain. He looks up from his note and sees that she is smiling. He thinks maybe it is the kind of smile that comes just before laughing. And then he thinks — *but maybe not*.

The chapter ends there, suspended in that possibility.

## Chapter 10: "The Broom Dog" and Epigraph

The final chapter begins with an extended meditation on the school bus — the motif that has threaded, invisibly, through every chapter of the novel. The opening declaration is simple: "A school bus is many things." What follows is a list — paradoxical, poetic, wide-ranging — of all the things a school bus can be depending on who is looking at it, and from where. A safe zone. A war zone. A bumblebee. A spaceship. A paintbrush painting the world a blurry brushstroke.

The chapter then introduces its protagonist: **Canton Post**, the son of **Ms. Post**, the school's crossing guard. Canton has been present in every previous chapter — glimpsed in the background with his mother, doing his homework on the curb, watching the neighborhood — but this is the first time he steps to the center of the story.

For Canton, a school bus represents something specific and terrible. One year ago, his classmate **Kenzi Thompson's** blue handball bounced into the street. Kenzi ran after it. A school bus was coming. Ms. Post jumped into the street to stop it, and the bus — unable to stop in time — struck her, injuring her shoulder and hip. She survived, but the incident shattered Canton. He was not there when it happened. He was inside the building talking to the school custodian, **Mr. Munch**, and learned about it after the fact. His skin, he recalls, felt like it was turning school bus yellow.

When Ms. Post returned to work just one week later, Canton's anxiety became unmanageable. Mr. Munch found him in the bathroom, chest heaving, unable to breathe properly — a panic attack. Mr. Munch helped him breathe. He walked Canton out to his mother, and Canton held her so tightly that she winced from the still-healing pain in her shoulder.

The next day, Mr. Munch took Canton aside and told him about his own wife's anxiety after their daughter left for college, and how an emotional support dog had helped. Mr. Munch then presented Canton with what he had made: the head of an old broom, detached from its handle, fashioned into a crude, improbable **broom dog**. He told Canton to run his fingers through its hair whenever his chest tightened. Canton named the broom dog **Dusty**. It worked, strange as it was. Whenever his chest began to feel like an inflating balloon, he stroked Dusty's bristles, and the panic subsided.

Now, a year later, Canton is sitting beside his mother's crossing guard post, working on a homework assignment from his social studies teacher, **Mr. Davanzo**: *Write about place. Write about people. Human environmental interaction.* Canton opens his notebook and begins to observe and record. He watches his classmates talk and argue and tell stories. He watches his mother work — and here the language turns beautiful: she performs a kind of ballet, spinning, stepping into the street as if made of more, blowing her whistle, putting up a hand to stop a bus, waving the walkers through.

As the afternoon deepens and his mother finishes her shift, Canton reaches to gather his things. The broom dog slips from his lap. He picks it up and looks at it, and something has shifted. His

mother notes that it is quite worn down after a year of use. She also notes, almost casually, that it no longer looks like a dog. It kind of looks like a bus, she says.

Canton considers this. He thinks about how long it has been since he actually *needed* the broom dog — not just carried it, but needed it. He realizes, quietly, that the answer is: a long time. The broom dog has become just a thing he had, a thing he knew was there.

On the walk home, Canton begins tossing the broom dog into the air and catching it. Then loose straw begins to separate from the bunch — piece by piece, falling around them like a slow rain. His mother looks up and says: *"It's a school bus falling from the sky."*

Canton catches the remaining straw, or lets it fall, and smiles — knowing a school bus is many things. And so is a walk home.

**The Epigraph** closes the novel with a quote from essayist **Garnette Cadogan** about a single foot's journey — anonymous, universal, propelled forward by longing toward a destination of rest. It is, finally, the thesis of the entire book: every journey, however small, however specific, however unglamorous, carries within it a weight of desire and a promise of arrival. The foot belongs to no one in particular, and therefore to everyone.