

# Fruit of the Vine

*Ellen Weisberg and Ken Yoffe*

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the mental health publisher

Ellen Weisberg and Ken Yoffe

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**Author Biography**

Ellen Weisberg, 43, is a research scientist working in the field of leukemia. Her literary publications include the young adult novel, “Gathering Roses” (Chipmunkapublishing, 2007). Ellen has also co-authored and illustrated several children’s geography books in collaboration with her husband, Ken Yoffe, 42, a pediatrician. Their geography series includes “All Across Canada” (Chipmunkapublishing, 2008) and “All Across China” (Chipmunkapublishing, 2009). Ellen and Ken are members of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).

They and their daughter, Emily, live in Nashua, NH.

Written with love, to those who deserve more of it.



## Fruit of the Vine

“Nerd!”

“Heh, heh! Loser!”

Justin stepped off the school bus and trudged along the side of the road. He stared hard at the dirt and pebbles that tumbled underneath him. He watched the dust swirl around his feet as he walked, the tiny stones dancing and bouncing off the tips of his sneakers. Concentrating, his head bowed low and his eyes fixed on the ground, he was still unable to block out the shouts from the bus’s windows as the vehicle revved its engine.

“Geek!”

“Weirdo!”

Someone threw a ripened banana peel out of one of the windows. It landed on a patch of gravel in front of him.

“Don’t slip!” someone yelled.

Just as Justin stepped over the slimy black and yellow peel, someone tossed an empty milk carton out of a window and hurled grapes that bounced off the small of his back.

“Why don’t you go back to the planet you came from, you alien spaceoid extraterrestrial freakazoid!” A chorus of cackling erupted after the final shout out, and gradually disappeared behind the roar of the engine as the school bus pulled away.

He cradled his upper body in his arms and quickened his pace. With his thin fingers he could feel how bony his elbows were. He could picture the kids on the bus studying the angles of his narrow face and chin. His ears were too big and his nose was pointy. His eyes were beady and hidden behind wire-framed glasses. He felt that he must have been some sight, much like the bearded fat lady or tap- dancing Siamese twins at a carnival freak show. The difference was that while those people welcomed an ogling crowd, all Justin wanted was to be invisible. At the very least he wanted to blend into the scenery like the stones and dirt he shuffled with his feet on his way home.



It was night, and Justin crawled into bed. He pulled an afghan first over his long chin and tiny mouth, then over his big nose, and finally over his small eyes. A hint of light broke through some woven holes in the blanket over his head. He wanted it to be darker, but he was too exhausted to walk outside his bedroom to pull the hallway night light out of its socket. He couldn't even muster the energy to just inch his way over to his bedroom door and close it. He squeezed his eyes shut trying to make his world as black and motionless as he possibly could, and waited for everything to disappear. *Everything*: the toys scattered about all over the floor, like an old, chocolate milk-stained Elmo and a box of Lego Space Police, all of which he had long outgrown but couldn't work up the energy to get rid of; the pile of astronomy and entomology books that had once fascinated him, but that lay untouched and unexplored for months; the sadness that blinded him every morning he rode the bus to school, and the pain that gripped him every afternoon as he walked the locker-lined halls.

Why couldn't every moment in his life be as quiet and peaceful as when he nestled in the soft comfort of his bed? How could life be so gentle and sweet during the long hours of the night, only to be rattled and shaken when the sunlight streamed through a cluster of high clouds and the first teases and taunts shot through the chilly morning air?

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He just didn't know.

Why did they make *him* their bulls-eye target? Why did they choose *him* over... say... Douglas, the kid at the bus stop after Justin's whose forehead was *huge* and whose eyebrows met over the bridge of his nose? Or... Judy, the girl four lockers down from him with the two huge, yellowish buck teeth who carried a pet frog wherever she went? Weren't kids like these more deserving of the mockery and scorn that Justin fell prey to day after wearisome day?

He just didn't know.

What he did know was that he would enjoy his time alone for as long as it was able to last. He would push one big floppy ear hard into his pillow and, keeping the afghan pulled tightly over his little eyes and sizable nose, he would drift off to sleep.

Or not. Too many thoughts were racing through his head. Was there ever a time in his life when he was... happy?

His mother told him stories about when he was a baby, born with a full head of jet black hair. Apparently, on occasion he would lie in his crib, tug hard on his hair, and cry loudly from the pain. It was possible that he threw similar tantrums before he was born, when he was too clueless to realize that no one could hear him because he was in a fluid-filled sack under layers of flesh. He wondered if unseen forces were bullying him as early as in the womb and in the cradle.

And there was Justin's older brother, with his obvious enjoyment of inflicting fear and pain on Justin in the games they would play as children. He used to tie Justin up in his own dirty socks, throw him into his bedroom closet, say in a fake British accent, "Time to check me fudge," and then leave Justin to free himself in a Houdini-esque fashion. Occasionally, hours later, their mother would notice that Justin had not shown up for dinner and she would search for him, only to find Justin writhing on the floor and salivating and chewing on a pilled sock wrapped tightly around his wrists.

Perhaps it was the 105° fever Justin's brother had one night as an infant that caused severe damage to the loving, compassionate section of his brain. Perhaps it was the hard impact of his brother's head against the floor when he was a baby and fell out of his high chair. Perhaps it was the smashing of his face against a bedpost as a toddler while trying to find his way through his darkened bedroom that jiggled something critical to his ability to resist picking on those much smaller than him. Perhaps it was the laryngitis he had at the time of his bar mitzvah that prevented the good Lord from being able to hear what he had to say that evening, and that resulted in the denial of his rite of passage into mature adulthood.

Perhaps it really didn't matter.

Brother or no brother, Justin never found himself at a loss for sadistic evil souls bent on draining every ounce of pride and confidence from Justin's being. Every week. Every day. Sometimes two or three times a day.



Justin tossed in one direction as the words “why don’t you go back to the planet you came from” echoed in his oversized ears.

He tossed in another direction as the word “extraterrestrial” buzzed in his overactive mind.

“Alien,” he whispered, shoving his head far underneath his pillow.

“Freakazoid,” he grumbled, pounding his fists on his mattress.

“Go back to the planet you...” His voice trailed off as exhaustion finally led him into a deep sleep.

Chills raced through his body and jostled him awake. It was almost as though he had fallen asleep in a tent at a campground moistened by a fine mist and cooled by late autumn breezes. But he was not out camping. He was sleeping in his soft bed, his head lost in a fluffy pillow, his face covered with an afghan. He folded his blanket down away from his eyes, expecting to see the dark outline of his bedpost, and the silhouette of his partly opened bedroom door against the dimly lit hallway wall.



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But what was this?

A tree in the distance?

Sand?

Ocean?

Justin squinted. It had to be his bedroom wall that for some reason looked like a... He squinted again. Like a... Huh? Where was his bedroom wall? Where was his bedroom ceiling? Actually, come to think of it... where were his *bed* and his *room*?

About all that looked familiar were the few flickering stars in the dark vastness of the midnight sky. It was still night time, and he was still covered by his hand-knitted afghan. Yet in place of his plush pillow and soft bed was a sandy beach. His bedpost was now a swaying, coconut-bearing palm tree, and the hall light had been replaced by a pale half moon.

Was this a joke? Would someone actually go to such lengths as to take him from the safety of his nightly cocoon and dump him in the middle of... nowhere? Or was he somewhere? Where *was* he, exactly?

He stood up from the patch of sand he had been lying on and brushed some loose grains off of his pajama bottoms. The sand was cool and dry, and it slipped off of the fabric easily. A chilly breeze tousled his hair and formed little goose bumps on his skin. Justin rubbed his upper arms, trying to warm them, but shivers continued to go down his spine. He was scared, and confused.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he looked around some more. It seemed like he was on some kind of a tropical island. The sand, palm trees, and sparkling ocean water in the far distance were definitely a far cry from the small New England town in which he had fallen asleep. In fact, it was a far cry from anything Justin had ever seen before. The closest he had ever come to strolling on a beach was the one time he and his family visited Grandma Fanny in Florida. Any beach strolls, though, were cut short by a trip to the local emergency room for Great Uncle Herman's chest pains that turned out to be gas.

In the distance, Justin could see a dark shadow moving under the branches of a moonlit palm. It seemed to be a kind of animal. Its head was large and smooth and oval, perched on top of a long neck extending into a narrow body. Its torso was at the center of two spindly arms and two very long and thin legs. The creature was simply standing motionless at the base of the tree, with its pointy shoulders hunched forward, its arms draped flat against its body. If any human quality at all could describe this creature, Justin thought it would be "sad." It appeared almost pitiful.

The black form began to move after staying in a frozen stance for what seemed like an unusually long time. As it started to migrate away from the palm tree, Justin leapt backward behind a huge, seaweed-strewn rock. What was it? And whatever it was, did it bite?

“Ouch! Man, that hurt!” came a squeal from underneath his feet. Startled, he quickly moved off the unknown source of the cry.

“You get three wishes, dude,” a somewhat annoyed voice said from below.

“Huh?” Justin was dazed. “Who’s... *what’s* this?”

“You step on the magic snake, dude, and you get three wishes. That’s just the way it goes. So what are they?”

Justin backed slowly away from the rock. A large snake slithered out from underneath it. It stretched its body high into the air and looked up at him.



“You...” Justin shut his eyes tightly and then opened them again. “I don’t get this. Wait.” Justin laughed nervously and waved his hand at the snake. “You can... *speak*? A *snake* can speak? Yeah, right...”

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He felt the air above the snake's head, searching for signs of marionette strings. "This is too much," he said. "Someone's messing with me."

"I ain't just a snake, dude," it hissed. "I'm a *magic* snake. And you have three wishes. You step on me, and I have to grant you three wishes of whatever you want. Those are the rules, boy. So what do you want? A new bike? Straight A's?"

"This is too weird," Justin said. "A... talking...*snake*?"

"Dude," the snake said. "Get over it, will you? And tell me what you want already. I have things to do. Come on. What are the wishes? New laptop with high speed Internet access? Wide angle binocular telescope? A Marvel Comics collection..."

The snake was interrupted by a strange sound in the distance. It was coming from the creature, which was hunched over with its oval head buried in its hands. It looked as if it was crying.

"Who... *what* is that?" Justin asked. "And where am I? What's going on?"

The snake hissed and wiggled away from the rock. "Irvino."

"Irvino? What's... Where's... Who's Irvino?"

"Irvino's the name of that dude crying over there," the snake said impatiently. "He's a Werloobee. Can you just tell me your three wishes so I can grant them and get outta here?"

"A... Werloobee? What's that?" Justin asked.

"Kiddo, you're cruisin' for a bruisin', you know that?" the snake hissed. "Do I look like an encyclopedia, or what?"

"I don't know where I am or what's going on," Justin said. "I was sleeping in my bed one minute, and next minute I'm... I don't know *what* or *where*. Can you just tell me what that thing is over there?"

"Werloobee... Wer-loo-bee," the snake said. "Come on, you honestly don't know what a Werloobee is? What kind of rock did you just crawl out from underneath?" The snake started to laugh. "Did you get that joke? Get it? I mean, me, a snake, asking *you* what kind of rock *you* crawled out of! Ha ha!"

Justin stood quietly, looking down at the snake, his mouth taut and straight across his face.

"No sense of *humor*, man!" the snake said, inching its way toward the tip of Justin's sneaker. "So a Werloobee, for those of us who apparently have led a very sheltered life, is this beach's main inhabitant. Hey, I really *do* sound like an encyclopedia, don't I?"

"Where am I? What island is this? And how did I get here?" Justin asked.

“Well, dude, all I can tell you is this. The ocean’s right over there.” The snake pointed its head toward the waves of water rolling on shore. “And I think this is one of them... how do you say it... archipelago types of places. As to *exactly* where you are, like in terms of degrees north or south or east or west like the position of a cyclone on the open waters, I just ain’t knowledgeable enough to let you know. Look, man. Give me your wishes. You’re really starting to annoy me. I got things to...”

The snake’s voice was drowned out by the sound of more cries in the distance. Irvino was still hunched over and wailing.

“What’s the matter with him?” Justin asked.

“Dude’s been banished.”

“Banished? What do you mean?”

“He’s been cut off from the rest. They didn’t want him around. They didn’t like him,” the snake said.

“There are *others*? Where?”

“They’re on the other side of the island. Look, if you don’t give me your three wishes, dude, I’m gonna...”

“What don’t they like about him?” Justin asked.





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“He’s different, man,” the snake said. “You know, he looks different from the rest. Smaller. *Skinny*. Three wishes, before I go out of my mind over here.”

“Is that why he’s crying?” Justin asked. “Because he’s all alone, away from the others?”

“I doubt it,” the snake said. “He was probably happy to get away from them. They were always picking on him and pushing him around.”

“Then what’s he so sad about?”

The snake sighed. “Dude, do I *really* have to get into this with you? After this, I’m telling you... I am going to be so unbelievably careful not to get stepped on. This is so not worth it.”

“Just tell me,” Justin said.

“Why do you care?”

“I just do. Tell me, okay?”

“If I were a real jerk, I’d make this count as one of your wishes. But because I’m a nice, man-about-town kind of guy, I’ll let this one slide. Get it? *Slide?* Like a snake? Ha! Anyway, so this dude Irvino was banished to a part of the island that isn’t very fertile.”

“Not fertile?” Justin asked. “What do you mean?”

“Man, you just have to have every little thing spelled out for you, don’t you?” the snake said, sighing loudly. “So like, Irvino’s upset because he’s been banished to a part of the island that has very little food. All he’s got is this one banana tree that grows over-ripened bananas that are so rotten that he can’t eat them. Then there’s this one crazy cow that always makes milk that tastes too spoiled to drink. And there’s one grapevine growing that’s constantly losing its grapes, which fall to the ground only to be stomped on and mashed by the crazy cow. Now what are your wishes, dude?”

Justin stared at the snake, trying to process everything that he was being told. This was difficult, as he was still trying to process the fact that he was talking to a talking snake.

“So...” Justin started, ignoring the snake’s persistence to get a wish out of him. “So... That’s why... he’s upset?”

“Nah, it’s even worse than just him not having much chow,” the snake murmured. “He’s hoping to put on some weight and get a little bigger so he can look more like the other dudes. Then maybe they’ll like him more.”

“But I thought you just said he was probably happy to be *away* from the others. Now you’re saying he wants them to like him *more?*” Justin shook his head and gave the snake a quizzical look.

“Well, uh... Um... What I mean is... Hey, man, we gotta *focus* here! Do you want these wishes or not?”

Justin continued. “And if he’s already ‘too thin for them,’ then why do the others banish him to a place with *less* food, when he needs it more than they do?”

The snake cocked his head to one side. “Yeah, I guess it doesn’t make much sense. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer.” For the first time, the snake looked more thoughtful and less impatient.

Justin looked over at Irvino, who had stopped sobbing. The creature was silent now, with his tall, oval head hidden behind his long, thin fingers.

“Why are the others being like that?” Justin asked. “Because he’s different? Because he has his own way about him? His own style? Because he isn’t a boring, carbon copy of the rest?”

The snake yawned. “I’m still waiting for your three wishes, man. Gettin’ tired of repeating myself.”

Justin’s face reddened. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and he wiped them angrily off with the back of his hand. “You know what I wish?” Justin growled, unable to control his rage. “You *really* want to know what I wish? I wish those rotten bananas over there would turn into awesome banana cream pie! I wish that sour milk from the crazy cow would turn into the most scrumptious of yogurt! And I wish those mashed grapes would turn into the sweetest, most delicious juice Irvino ever drank! Those are my three wishes!”

The snake stared up at Justin and remained quiet for a moment. Then it shook its head, drew a deep breath and stretched its body high into the air.

“Okay, dude. Here you go,” the snake hissed. A sliver of red tongue shot out from its mouth, and its head began to vibrate wildly. The ground rumbled, and soon rolls of sand along the beach rapidly formed and raced underneath shallow waves of ocean water. Funnels of fiery smoke darted out from both sides of the snake’s head. Its eyes bulged out of its sockets as it focused on the banana tree.

Whoosh!

A mushroom of explosive smoke enveloped the tree and then slowly cleared. Once the last puffs of thick hot air drew away, what stood in the tree’s place was a large tin filled to its rim with banana cream pie. The snake turned its attention to the cow, and its eyes protruded and sliver of tongue thrashed madly about.

Whoosh!

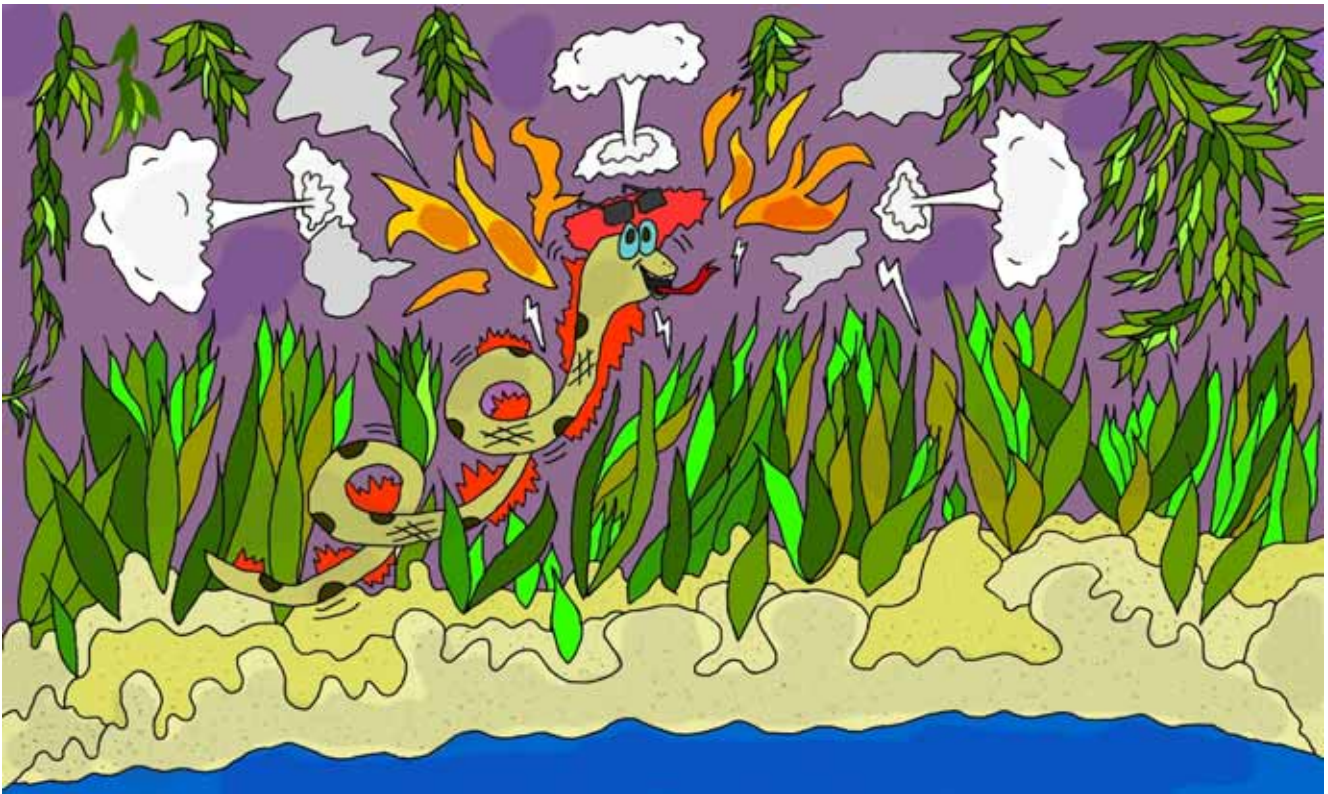
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Charcoal black smoke danced around buckets of spoiled, curdled milk nearby where the cow stood. Once the final spirals of twisting dark air pulled away, the buckets sat overflowing with rich, creamy yogurt.

The snake's head then moved wildly about before positioning itself to face the trodden grapes mashed into the ground. Streaks of bone-white lightning flew out of the snake's eyes and branched out into the open air.

Whoosh!

White and yellow flames danced on the ground underneath the twisted grapevine. One by one the flames died down, replaced by silver clouds of smoke that eventually thinned out and disappeared into the night. A trough of sparkling juice came into view behind the last wisps of departing smoke, the surface of the liquid rippling in the moonlight.



Irvino's head swung rapidly to the left and right as he neared each item of delicious food. He hovered over the trough of juice and drank it in big, thirsty gulps. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he dashed to the buckets of yogurt and dipped his hands deep inside of them. He then buried his face in his yogurt-filled hands and licked them, moaning with delight.

He raced to the edge of the beach and dunked his hands in the ocean waters to cleanse them before he headed for the huge tin of banana cream pie to get his fill of dessert. Occasionally he would glance in the direction of the rock where Justin and the snake were. Justin noticed that along with Irvino's joy were also other emotions: surprise and curiosity.

In the distance, Justin could see Irvino's dark shadow growing against a moonlit group of palms as he ate, drank, and groaned with satisfaction. With one final sip of sweet juice, Irvino stood tall and stretched his fattened arms out to both sides. A shattering wail erupted from his lips, a wail so powerful that the earth beneath him trembled, and night creatures scurried away to safety.

A hush fell over the island then. It was a hush so quiet, all that could be heard was the sound of waves tumbling against the ocean sand. Justin's head jerked in response to movements he could see out of the corner of his eye. He turned toward a group of palm trees not far from where Irvino stood, where he could vaguely see the dark outlines of large ovals peeking in and out of branches and peering out from behind willowy trunks. There seemed to be hundreds of them, heads smooth and large, much like Irvino's. Slowly, cautiously, the heads began to emerge from behind the palms, and within seconds Irvino was surrounded. Justin immediately noticed that the other Werloobees were similar in size to the newly enlarged Irvino.

A particularly large Werloobee approached Irvino with several inquisitive but kindly grunts. Irvino hesitated only a second before nodding his head and excitedly giving a few grunts of his own. He then proudly waved his hand in the direction of his newly found feast.

Arms reached out to touch Irvino and lift him high above all of the bubbly figures bobbing about. Irvino lifted his own arms up into the night air and leaned his head back, emitting cries of what sounded like joyous laughter.

"Well that sure did it!" chuckled the snake. "Irvino's pretty much their hero now, since he ain't so skinny anymore, AND especially since he's sharing all of his awesome grub!" The snake peered longingly towards the quickly disappearing banana cream pie.



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A wild celebration seemed to go on for hours. In the midst of it all, Werloobees continued to crowd around Irvino, often several of them grunting to him at once, and others offering him food or even just reaching out to touch him.

And then Justin noticed something interesting: Irvino had stopped eating and wasn't laughing quite as much as he had been. He appeared to not be taking as much notice of the Werloobees that continued to surround him, showering him with attention and affection.

*He doesn't look sad like before, Justin thought. Just a little bit... wistful?*

Justin then quietly crouched behind the rock with the magic snake by his side, and rose up only when the last cheers and applause had quieted down and the bands of Werloobees retreated, leaving Irvino alone.

"Why didn't he go back with the others?" Justin whispered to the snake.

"Don't know," the snake replied. "They sure invited him though. He could pretty much run for Werloobee president!"

Irvino's head raised up and his eyes darted to where Justin stood stretching his stiffened legs and aching back. Irvino turned his head in the direction of the rock and began clumsily edging his way toward it.

"What should I do?" Justin asked the snake frantically as he squatted again behind the rock. "Huh? What should I do?"

"Chill, dude," the snake hissed. "He isn't gonna hurt you. Irvino's cool."

Irvino continued to creep closer, pausing only to crane his neck and peer over the rock. The snake boldly slithered away from Justin.

"Hey, bro. What's happenin'?" the snake asked Irvino, wiggling toward the Werloobee's enormous webbed feet. "Congrats, my main man. Look at you, all buff and proud now. Heh, heh! Best lookin' with the best cookin'. Hey, speakin' of which... You wouldn't believe how this dude over here went out on a limb for you. Ha! A snake talking about limbs! Get it?"

Irvino's eyes crossed and his head cocked to one side. He listened intently to the snake, glancing curiously over at Justin.

"This crazy dude had three wishes that I could grant him, but instead of using those wishes on himself, he used his wishes on *you*." The snake then explained everything that had happened, from Justin stepping on him to Justin's three wishes.

Irvino whimpered softly and began to wring his hands. He rocked back and forth in place for a few seconds and then started to take wobbly steps toward Justin.

"Aaaah!" the snake shrieked. Its body was trapped under the heel of Irvino's foot as the Werloobee continued to lumber toward Justin. Irvino wrapped his long, thin arms around Justin and squeezed him tightly.

"Not again," the snake hissed. "Irvino, man, you gotta watch where you're going. You got three wishes coming your way now. But please don't take as long as the dude did, okay?"

Irvino released Justin from his embrace and slowly turned around to look down at the snake. Half of its body was flattened and pressed into the ground. Irvino grunted twice before whistling through his broad and hooked nose. His large, soulful eyes blinked a few times before he erupted into one final, high-pitched wail.

"Hey, man, thanks," the snake said, before the squashed part of its body was surrounded by swirls of misty air. The flattened part of the snake's body swelled to match the rest of him.

"I've never run into more selfless folk than the two of you dudes," the snake said. "Irvino, you've still got two more wishes..."

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“I’d like to go home,” Justin interrupted. “Could Irvino use one of his wishes to get me back home?”

The snake looked over at Irvino. “Hey, I’d say it’s only fair, man. This dude was only thinking about you before when he used up all three of his own wishes. It’ll be nice payback if you return the favor. You’ll still have one wish left that you can use for yourself.”

Irvino’s eyes opened wide and slowly filled with tears. He reached an arm out to Justin and placed his hand on Justin’s shoulder. He turned his head back toward the snake and grunted a few times.

“Irvino wants to know if you’re *absolutely sure* you want to go home. Hey, he likes you, and doesn’t want you to leave,” the snake said to Justin.

Justin looked into Irvino’s eyes. He nodded his head slowly, and said, “I’m sorry, but yes, I’m sure.”

Huge tears slid down Irvino’s wide, flat face. He looked down at the snake and paused before nodding his head with one last grunt.

“All right, man. It’s show time,” said the snake. “He says he’ll do anything for his only *real* friend.”

Suddenly both the snake and Irvino disappeared from view as Justin found himself surrounded by bright, white steam. The steam, warm and thick, crept into Justin’s mouth and nostrils and filled his lungs. Justin felt his body grow limp and numb, and gradually he sank into a deep, restful slumber.

“Goon!”

“Wimp!”

The sounds of shouting and laughter startled Justin. He lifted his head away from a pane of glass and wiped some dried saliva off of the corner of his mouth and chin.

Where was Irvino? Where was the snake? Justin sat straight up in what he realized was a cushioned seat on his school bus. Hecklers from the back of the bus were throwing hand-folded paper airplanes and spitting slimy cherry pits in Justin’s direction. A hand reached over the back of Justin’s seat and set an empty milk carton on the top of his head. He angrily swatted it away.

His mind was still somewhat asleep. He ran his tongue over his teeth, trying to get some moisture flowing into his dry mouth. He wondered how he got to where he was. He wondered where he had been.

He thought about Irvino. Had he made the last of his three wishes? And if so, what was it? What could he possibly still want or need, seeing that he had the admiration and respect of everyone and anyone he had ever known?

Slippery cherry pits continued to fly toward Justin. Most soared past his head and bounced off of the back of the seat in front of him. Occasionally one would land in his hair and he'd have to fish it out with his thumb and forefinger. He felt another empty milk carton being balanced on the center of his scalp. Again, he irritably swept his hand across his head and knocked the carton to the floor.

A shrill howl suddenly cut through the commotion and brought all of the children to silence. Justin's head swung around and he found his eyes locking with those of an enormous blond-haired boy standing in front of the emergency exit door at the back of the bus. The child's piercing blue eyes shifted away from Justin and narrowed like a cat's as he started to walk between the seats and up the bus aisle. The pranksters froze in their seats as the large boy stalked past them, his hands balled up into threatening fists, his eyes glaring at their frightened faces.



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A broad smile swept across the boy's face when he eased his way into an empty seat next to Justin. Still smiling, he winked at him.

"Name's Irving," the boy said. "You can call me 'Irv' for short." He held a small cardboard carton of grape juice out to Justin. Justin took it, placed his dry lips on the edge of a tiny sipping straw, and quickly began to drink.

The sugary juice trickled easily down Justin's throat. After one final gulp, Justin licked his newly moistened lips, enjoying the delicious aftertaste of the beverage. His new friend sat quiet and still, a content expression on his face. Justin smiled as well, thinking of the sweetness of a wish and the splendor of a dream.