20,000 leagues under the sink

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20,000 leagues under the sink

by

Andrew Segedi

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Joseph Geha

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Andrew Segedi

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College
DEDICATION

This piece is respectfully dedicated to George Lucas.
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CHAPTER 1: THE BIG JINX YEAR

Hi. I'm Jonah Crabtree. I know, crab-tree, crab-apple, crab-ass. I've heard them all, believe me, so just lay off. This story isn't about my name, anyway. It's about what's under the bathroom sink in my house.

I didn't notice anything weird down there until just after my thirteenth birthday. Actually, a lot of weird stuff happened after I hit the Big Jinx-Year, as my Aunt Viv called it (if the name Crabtree fits anyone on earth, it's my Aunt Viv; more on her later).

My birthday was on January 3, and as usual my mom planned a party for me. It was a normal birthday party. Well, normal for me, anyway. I knew the other kids at school had real birthday parties—you know, with cool music and games and people my age. Not me. Not since last year, when my mom caught me and this other guy, Rob Plunk, listening to a CD by Snot Factory. My mom is on a Crusade to Rid The World Of The Evil Of Rock Music, and has been ever since Jesus visited her back when I was seven or eight (Mom knows the exact date and time), just after my dad died. So the guys in Snot Factory aren't exactly on her Christmas Card list. Actually, I thought they sounded pretty silly myself, just a lot of really fast drums and screaming—the "singer" sounded a lot like Yosemite Sam. I guess they're fun to listen to every once in a while. Anyway, Rob was the last person from school I had over at my house—after the fit my mom threw he kind of avoided me.
My birthday parties are dull. They hardly deserve to be called parties at all. They’re more like excuses for my mom to invite old people over and talk about stuff that would bore the pants off a rock. This year, the youngest person there besides me was Aunt Viv, who won’t tell anyone how old she is but who’s got to be at least 40. The oldest person there was Mrs. Benko, who according to my mom is 94. And then you have me and my mom. We’re talking serious dull here. My mom’s idea of decorating the house was writing *Happy Birthday Jonah!* on the dry-erase board right below the daily Scripture passage. I can never make any sense of these. My mom would probably kill me if I ever told her, but I’ve formed the opinion that whoever wrote the Bible was seriously drunk at the time.

On Lucky Birthday Number 13, I came home out of breath from delivering *The Bird*, Gungywamp’s weekly newspaper, in record time. When I saw my mom’s note to me on the dry-erase board, and heard her and Aunt Viv and Mrs. Benko yukking it up in the living room, I knew that turning 13 wasn’t going to be all that special.

The first hint that I was very, very wrong was Aunt Viv’s present. Aunt Viv is a bit unusual to begin with. She’s barely four feet tall, munchkin-size, because God Works In Mysterious Ways, according to mom. Still, despite her stumpiness, she always commands attention no matter where she is. Her nickname is The General, and I learned at an early age that you just never know what to expect from her. Once, she simply showed up and (miracle of miracles) whisked me away from my Bible-studies, sat me next to her booster-
seat in her big, black Cadillac, and drove me thirty miles away to a reptile petting-zoo before my mom could begin to argue. And why argue? After all, she was The General.

Now, despite the fact that I hadn't yet opened Aunt Viv's present, I had already given up hope of getting anything good. My mom, as usual, gave me a subscription renewal for Bible Adventures!, a magazine that wasn't nearly as exciting as its covers. They tried to look like the covers of comic books, only with Jesus on them instead of the Wolverine, or Aqua-Man (my personal favorite). Mrs. Benko, who I noticed had a few more purple worms in her legs than the last time she was over, gave me a transistor radio. She apparently didn't know that I had a boom-box with a CD-player already, and that the hideous country music she was listening to at that very moment (my mom's choice) was coming from it. So I really wasn't expecting anything too cool to be lurking beneath the silver wrapping paper of Aunt Viv's present, especially since it was very close to being hotwheel-sized. Nothing that small could be any cooler than a hotwheels, and I had gotten bored with those things back when I was ten. So with my well-used Birthday Party Smile still plastered on my face, I tore open the wrapping paper and opened the small cardboard box underneath.

Inside it was the key to Heaven.

It was a small plastic card with a spiffy picture of a smiling shark on it. Below that, the words Gungywamp Marine-life Aquarium, and below that, in bright red letters: Jonah H. Crabtree, Charter Member.
Now, immediately my mom started asking Aunt Viv when this
Aquarium opened and what had happened to this-or-that present she was
planning on giving me. I sat speechless on the couch. So long, Birthday Party
Smile. I was grinning for real now. One of my hobbies is drawing, and my
favorite things to draw are fish. I think this is because I've always had dreams
where I am a fish, sort of flying through the sea like Aqua-Man only without
the dorky costume. In my spare time at school, I make up all these wacky
new kinds of fish, and sometimes draw short comic strips from them, making
them go on fantastic underwater crime-fighting adventures. I don't
remember much about my dad—he died when I was six—but I still have the
20-gallon aquarium he used to keep in the living room. It's a pretty cool tank,
but the only fish they have at the pet store are freshwater. The really strange-
looking ones live in salt water, according to the pictures in the books I've read.
And now I was a member of the new public Aquarium! I looked down at the
card again. A glint from the window made it look like the shark on the card
winked at me. I laughed out loud.

Aunt Viv stopped telling my mom about the grand opening last week
and looked over at me, her eyes narrowing.

"You like?" she asked, short and to the point as always.

"Oh, I like," I said, still eyeing the grinning shark on the card. There
was something funny about it that I couldn't quite figure out.

"I thought so, what with all those fish pictures you're always drawin'.

Now," Aunt Viv leaned forward in her chair and thrust her index finger
towards me. This meant she was about to give orders, so I looked up from the membership card for the first time. “Any time you want to go down there, you give me a call, and I’ll drive you down. I’ve already been there, so I’ll just drop you off and pick you up again when you call. They have payphones. I’ll give you a quarter. Got it?”

I got it. I wouldn’t even have to go with Mom! All right!

“Yep, thanks Aunt Viv!” I said, meaning it. Aunt Viv shrugged and sat back in her chair again, taking a sip of black coffee from the special oversized mug she was never seen without. My mom started saying something about whether I was old enough to be on my own in the Aquarium, but Aunt Viv shot her a look and that ended that. Ignoring this, I got up and showed my mom my membership card. She looked at it for a second, smiled a little, and told me that it was very nice, dear. It didn’t look like the shark winked at her. Old Mrs. Benko, sitting in the puffy chair by the window, laughed and started talking to the plants again.

I didn’t know it then, but it was here, at the World’s Most Boring Birthday Party (minus Aunt Viv’s present), that it all started.
CHAPTER 2: PORTHOLES AND PIPES

That night, brushing my teeth before spending my first night as a Thirteen-Year-Old, I couldn't stop thinking about the Aquarium. I had to hand it to Aunt Viv. She knew the perfect present for me even better than I did!

Lately, I had started hanging my fish-drawings up in my room. I cut them out in the shapes of portholes, so the walls of my room looked kind of like the walls of some bedroom-submarine. Behind them, instead of my mom's bedroom, or the hallway, or what was behind my real window (I had a porthole on the window-shade), swam whales, manatees, sea-cucumbers, manta-rays and, of course, sharks. I had even started drawing landscapes, or sea-scapes, behind my fish. I got most of my ideas from the dreams where I was actually swimming around like Aqua-Man.

In the best dreams, I'd be in this huge undersea city of sand-pillars, where all the crabs and lobsters lived. When I drew this city, I made up a cool system of transportation for these slow creatures. They shot these big bubbles from one pillar to another, and just hung on to them as they floated to their destination. And they didn't have to worry about the bubbles bursting, or floating up to the surface, either—my rule was, if I could draw it, it existed. In another porthole, hung on my closet door, I had a vast forest of sea-weed which was very dark so all the ugly fish hid in it. The only problem was I had drawn it so dark it was kind of hard to see the fish. After a while, even I couldn't find most of them in the shadows of the seaweed-trees. This was the
only drawing that came from dreams that weren't all that pleasant. Sometimes I'd wake up in a panic after dreaming about being lost in that forest—with Something else that knew where I was.

At first, my mom didn't approve of my hobby, saying it wasn't very "spiritual." She was always on me about doing more activities with my Bible Study group, but believe me, one day a week with that bunch of losers was more than enough for me, thank you. They all wore adult clothes, like suits and stuff, and tried to talk and act all grown-up, it was sickening. I have plenty of experience with grownups from my mom's "parties" with her weird friends, and I have no desire to be one anytime soon. I think that after a certain age your brain releases some kind of toxin that makes you either incredibly crazy or incredibly dull.

Anyway, my Bible study group all thought I was just a complete freak, I guess partially because I didn't look like them. I always wear cheap, comfortable clothes. The one victory I had won against my mother in the past year was when I convinced her to let me buy my own clothes as opposed to those horrid suits she'd buy me (my mom is color blind, so I'd wind up with lime green pants and a purple jacket—real stylish). But they mostly didn't like me because when I was stuck at Bible Study, I liked to amuse myself by asking Pastor Halford annoying questions he couldn't answer, like "Were Adam and Eve ape-people?" My goal was to get him so pissed off he'd eventually kick me out of the group, but so far all he did was glare at me and then change the
subject. Hey, they wouldn't let me draw there, so I had to do something to keep from falling asleep.

Anyway, eventually my mom figured out that I was pretty good at my drawings, "spiritual" or not, so she had this art teacher named Miss Barth come over once a week to give me lessons.

Miss Barth is the prettiest lady I have ever seen.

She's got this wavy brown hair that goes all the way down her back, and these eyes that are more blue than any shade of paint or crayon I had. Sometimes, she'd guide my hand with hers, and I'd get all stiff in my pants and hope to God I wouldn't have to stand up anytime soon. Not that I minded—after the first time I kind of liked it—but if my mom knew what was going on down there she'd probably put an end to my lessons very quickly.

Actually, the lessons didn't do me much good anyway. Miss Barth was Jesus-crazy just like my mom, and she only let me draw "spiritual" pictures. This actually wasn't too hard—I'd just draw my normal sea-scapes, then throw in Jesus somewhere, swimming around like Aqua-Man or something. Sometimes my mom and Miss Barth loved this—my mom even framed this one picture I did, supposedly of "angels" floating around in Heaven, though if you looked closely they were really just manta-rays with human faces. The other good thing about the lessons was Miss Barth always brought me new supplies of notebooks and colored pencils. And now I had a big stack of them, waiting for my first trip to the Aquarium.
So this is what I was thinking about that night as I swished Listerine. Behind me in the mirror, I imagined schools of orange clownfish, rubbing their backs on the hanging sea anemones—jelly-like creatures with hundreds of bristles that were poisonous to everything except clownfish. Some of them, called Tinafore anemones, could even glow in the dark. Above them, a bunch of baby eels poked their heads out from the air-vent as if to say—

"Jonah," a gurgling voice said.

I half-swallowed, half-snarfed my mouthful of Listerine. Standing absolutely still, I waited for the voice to return. It sounded like it came from the sink, which was impossible.

After a minute of silence, I started to feel kind of queasy from swallowing that Listerine, so, carefully, I grabbed a glass and filled it with water. As I drank it down, I thought I heard a gargling, grunting sound come from the drain. I stopped again, my heart starting to jiggle the buttons on my pajama top. Kneeling, I took a deep breath and threw open the cabinet beneath the sink. Nothing was there except a couple spray bottles and some sponges. I closed the door and stood up, looking at the drain.

"Hello?" I whispered. Nothing. I crept closer to the sink, keeping an eye on the bathroom door in case a tentacle or something sprung from the drain and tried to strangle me.

"What do you want?" I said, louder this time. I was starting to feel really dumb for talking to my sink. But I could still hear that voice. It was a deep voice, echo-like. I knew I hadn't been imagining it. Making sure I still
had a clear path to the door, I leaned into the sink and pushed my right eye up against the drain. I could only see an inch or two, and the smell of hair and Scope was pretty foul, so I drew back before anything could grab me. I turned on the water for a few seconds, to see if that would bring the voice back. But all I heard were a few normal gurgles.

I turned and left the bathroom, turning off the light behind me, not realizing that, in the next few days, things would get a whole lot weirder.
CHAPTER 3: MRS. JONES

When I got to school the next day all the other kids in my class looked like they had just seen the Devil himself. Sure, it was the first day back after Christmas break, but this was the first time I had ever walked into room 6C to find it totally silent. Mr. Gatt, our teacher, wasn’t even there yet. Not that it would have mattered much. Mr. Gatt is going a little deaf, so people in the back row like me could basically sing the National Anthem all day at the top of our lungs and he wouldn’t know it.

I sat down at my desk, slipping my current sneak-reading material—a gory book about shark attack victims complete with full-color photos—underneath my as-yet unused History book. Mr. Gatt believes that our textbook is biased against Germany, his homeland, so during History he tells us how things “really were.” He’s a bit of a Nazi, sure, but other than that Mr. Gatt was all right. Except that now he was almost ten minutes late. I turned to face Aaron, the nerdy guy who sits next to me and is always playing with electronic equipment. Like the rest of the class, he was staring at his hands, shaking his head, white as a sheet.

“Hey, what the hell’s going on, who died?” I whispered, even though there was absolutely no need to whisper. The atmosphere of room 6C was really creeping me out. Aaron jumped, startled, almost knocking a mechanical pencil out of his pocket-protector.

“You mean you haven’t heard?” he whispered, as if he thought maybe the room was bugged or something.
"Heard what, I just got here," I said, not whispering anymore. This was ridiculous. I took out my shark book and started flipping through it, looking for a really sick picture to show him. Aaron’s a pretty good guy, though a bit weird since he’s electrocuted himself five times.

I finally found what I was looking for, a picture of this surfer who actually had his leg bitten off twice (the second one was plastic), when he said it.

"Mr. Gatt’s sick. Our substitute is Mrs. Jones."

Mrs. Jones was the most feared substitute teacher in the state. Nobody in our school had ever seen her, but her legend has been passed on from kid to kid, school to school, city to city, so that the mere mention of her name sent shivers up my spine. I had been hearing about her for years. When I was younger, my mom would sometimes tell me that if I kept reading comics under the covers with a flashlight, Mrs. Jones would appear under my bed in a cloud of yellow fog and take me away. My mom claimed that she had even had Mrs. Jones as a teacher when she was a girl. Which would make Mrs. Jones about a hundred years old.

At this point I noticed that Aaron had spun around and was again facing the front of the classroom, hands folded neatly on his desk.

"Hey, what’s—"

At first I thought it was a mass of squid tentacles that grabbed me by the shoulder. But when I turned around I saw that they were thick, doughy
fingers, black veins worming around them, and they were attached to the
most muscular arm I have ever seen on a woman.

She towered above me, built like a linebacker. Not fat, but bulky,
refrigerator-sized. She wore an iron-gray dress that almost matched her
steely hair, which was pulled back in a bun so tight her eyes seemed
permanently wide-open. She was smiling at me, but it looked more like she
was a Great White shark about to gobble me up.

"What's the problem, skinny-boy?" she boomed, then cackled, loud as a
machine-gun. Everyone else flinched. I tried to say something, but all that
came out were gurgles.

"I'll take that, big-mouth," she said when she had calmed down,
snatching my shark book from me. "Why don't you join me up front?" And
with that she grabbed my desk with both her arms (they were the size of my
legs, I'm not kidding), lifted it over her head and stomped to the front of the
room. My desk came crashing down next to Mr. Gatt's. What am I saying? It
was Mrs. Jones' desk now.

I felt strangely naked now, the only student in the room without a desk
in front of me, but I couldn't move.

"Come on, skinny-boy, let's go, or do you need me to carry your chair
for ya, too?" Mrs Jones said. It sounded like she was shouting, but something
told me this was her normal speaking voice.

Slowly, making sure my shaking knees would support me, I stood up.
Everyone was looking at me, wide-eyed, so I tried to play it cool, but I knew I
looked like a mouse alone in a room with a hungry cat. I pushed the chair
toward the front of the room as Mrs. Jones began to call roll. The Big Jinx-
Year had officially started.
CHAPTER 4: THE NEW GIRL

The front of the classroom is where all the rejects sit. These are the bullies, the homeys, the spit-wad launchers, the freaks, the geeks—your basic dregs of Elementary School society. I knew enough to steer clear of them when I could, but for the most part they didn’t bother me. Most likely, it was out of respect for the fact that I had been held back a year, like most of them. Or they just sensed that I was older than they were.

As I sat down and half-listened to Mrs. Jones bellow about her Rules and Regulations (which, despite her reputation, sounded pretty standard to me), I noticed someone else in the Reject Aisle. It was the filthiest girl I’ve ever seen.

She was wearing boys’ clothes, for one. Corduroys and a flannel shirt way too big for her, each crusted with mud and god knows what else. She had brown hair and brown eyes, and actually looked nice enough, but her face and hair looked like they hadn’t been washed in weeks. As I started to wonder about how far lice could jump, she leaned towards me a little.

“What’s with her?” she whispered to me, watching Mrs. Jones list, in order of severity, the penalties associated with “desecrating” our desks. As soon as the new girl spoke, Mrs. Jones whirled around on her ridiculously high heels and aimed a bratwurst-sized finger at us.

“The penalty for whispering in class, however, is much more severe,” she boomed, and I started to get an idea where her reputation came from.
“Sorry, ma’am, I’m new here, I was just asking this guy if I missed any holiday homework,” this new girl said to Mrs. Jones, apparently not scared at all. She even smiled at this towering woman. She was dead.

Mrs. Jones returned the new girl’s smile for an uncomfortably long time. The only sound in the room was the hum of the fluorescent lights and the distant voice of Mr. Bachman talking about Hessian soldiers in the Revolutionary War (like Mr. Gatt, Mr. Bachman is going a little deaf, too). The only experience I’ve ever had that was anything like this devastating tension was in the dentist’s chair, waiting for the drill to hit a nerve.

“Well, it looks like we’ve got something in common,” Mrs. Jones said, sickly-sweet, “because I’m new here, too!” Again, Mrs. Jones and the new girl traded smiles in absolute silence. Finally, Mrs. Jones continued, “What’s your name?”

“Carrie Homer,” the new girl said, and a couple of the rejects sniggered at her name. They’re programmed to, I think—her name could have been Jane Smith and they still would have thought it was hilarious. This finally brought the standoff between Mrs. Jones and Carrie Homer to an end, as our substitute stormed to the desk of one of the sniggering rejects (Jessie Gimbel, like that’s a cool name) and, in a spit-flying tirade about Courtesy in the Classroom, promptly reduced him to tears. It was at this point that I decided that Carrie Homer, and maybe even Mrs. Jones, were all right.
I looked over at Carrie and gave her a look that thanked her for taking the heat off me. She, in turn, stuck her tongue out at me and looked straight ahead at the chalkboard, smirking.

Mrs. Jones finally got around to calling roll, and I suddenly had an appreciation for her, despite her general horribleness, because for the first time in my life, a teacher called me by my full name and not a single person in the room made fun of it.

"Now, class," Mrs. Jones said when she was finished with the roll, "we have an assembly this morning. We're already late because of the outbursts by Miss Homer and Mister Gimbel, so you're going to have to make up for it. Do you know how?"

The class, predictably, was silent. I was about to suggest jumping-jacks when Mrs. Jones continued.

"You're going to line up straighter than any other class in the whole school. And if you don't..." Mrs. Jones reached inside her oversized purse and pulled out a rolling pin. The class gasped. And formed the straightest line we've ever formed and marched right down to the gymnasium for the assembly.

So it was obvious Mrs. Jones had a screw loose. I had to admit, though, she made school a lot more interesting.
CHAPTER 5: THE UFO PROBLEM

When we were finally seated in the gymnasium (we really weren’t late at all), Mrs. Jones announced to us that even though she was going to stand at the opposite end of the gym and talk to Principal Blessing, she would still be able to see and hear everything we did. She said she had eyes, telescopic eyes, in the back of her head. Even though some of us were still a little flustered by that rolling pin, as soon as she walked away we started whispering to each other. We were, after all, sixth graders. The telescopic eyes in the back of the head thing had lost its effectiveness years ago.

It turned out I was sitting next to Carrie Homer. She started talking right away, though I wasn’t sure who, exactly, she was talking to.

“She’s part of it, you know. I’m going to put her under surveillance. I’ll have to be careful, though, she looks like she might be a Leader. It’s tough to take down a Leader by yourself. But she’s definitely part of it. Look at her shoes! There’s no way heels that thin could support somebody that big unless they were made from UFO parts. I’m going to stake out her house. What do you think?”

Carrie Homer was facing me now. Two things were obvious. One, she was talking to me, and not to herself. Two, she was even crazier than Mrs. Jones.

“Uh, about what?” I whispered. Officer Patton, a local police officer, had taken the stage and was testing the microphone by banging it on his head. Carrie Homer rolled her eyes.
“About the UFO Problem,” she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“What, she’s an alien?” I asked, trying to keep my mouth from moving so the teachers standing against the wall didn’t notice. Officer Patton started talking. Nobody ever listened to his assembly lectures, mostly because Officer Patton talks in the most mind-numbingly, soul-shatteringly dull monotone in the known universe. That and he repeats himself at least six times, so his assemblies usually go on and on until finally Principal Blessing has to take mercy on him and escort him off the stage. Today, Officer Patton’s topic was Don’t Talk to Strangers. To avoid getting caught talking, Carrie Homer and I started writing on one of the flyers that Officer Patton was passing around (and which many kids were already busily turning into paper airplanes).

_Haven’t you read any of those UFO books?_ Carrie wrote, _Aliens are landing all over the place, and disguising themselves as humans! Are you totally out of it???

“....second disappearance in this area in the last month, so if you see or hear anything from anyone about anything anytime anywhere....” droned Officer Patton.

_There are no UFOs, _ I wrote back, _That’s just a stupid hoax. So are these stakeout things the reason you’re covered in mud?_ 

_No, I collect snakes and lizards from swamps and things. There’s a great swamp out by our house—I caught two king snakes this morning. And_
you're nuts if you don't believe me about UFOs. My books contain official papers that prove they're landing all over the place.

"...so even if they call you by name and tell you Mom or Dad said it's okay for them to pick you up, just say no and walk away, and make sure you report it to me if something like this happens to you anywhere, anytime, any—"

Cool! I wrote on the flyer. We were running out of room. Where do you keep all of them, snakes and stuff I mean.

I live in the basement, for now, wrote Carrie Homer, So I just have a lot of cages set up down there. I have an extensive Dead Bug Collection, also.

"...can strike at any time, at any place, any time, any of....."

So can I see them sometime? I wrote. I don't know why, but my heart was pounding. Carrie Homer gave me a funny look, and scribbled on the last available space on the back of the flyer.

I don't know if I can trust you, yet. You might be one of Them. I'll let you know, she wrote, and stuck her tongue out at me, looking up at Officer Patton, who was being escorted, still talking, off the stage by Principal Blessing. I turned the flyer over to see what it was.

The word “MISSING" ran across the top, and below it was a picture of Rob Plunk wearing, as usual, a Snot Factory T-shirt.
CHAPTER 6: THE MAN IN THE BLACK HAT

The rest of the school day was uneventful. Despite what Carrie Homer said about Mrs. Jones being some kind of an alien, our new substitute turned out to be just like most other teachers—boring. The only time she used her rolling pin was when Matt Higgins fell asleep and started drooling all over his workbook. Mrs. Jones slammed the rolling pin down on Matt’s desk. From the look on his face, I don’t think he’ll ever fall asleep again, anywhere.

At the end of the day, Carrie Homer skipped out of class too fast for me to talk to her. I had already decided that, even though she was completely nuts, Carrie Homer was probably the most interesting person at school.

When I got home, I knew I had a couple hours before my mom came home from Church (she works there as a secretary), so the first thing I did after making a peanut-butter and chocolate-syrup sandwich was call Aunt Viv. Fifteen minutes later, I was walking through the seaweed-covered gates of the Gungywamp Marine-Life Aquarium.

Now, after the whole Rob Plunk thing, I didn’t especially feel like going to the Aquarium alone. But I also didn’t feel like telling Aunt Viv I was scared—she has a thing about “wimps”—so I settled for meeting her outside the gates at five o’clock.

“Sharp,” Aunt Viv said, and revved her black Caddy’s engine, disappearing in a cloud of exhaust.
The ticket window area was very dark, and it had a special lighting that made the white stripes on my shirt glow. I also made all the pieces of dust on it glow, so I looked like I was covered in snow. It was kind of cool.

I took out my membership card, and the lady behind the booth scanned Sid the Smiling shark with a special laser beam, then let me into the Aquarium.

For a minute, all I could do was stand and stare. All around me, everywhere, there were dazzling creatures of the sea. A walkway wound up the circular shape of the building, and the walls were lined with tank after tank of spectacularly colored life. The whole place was fairly dark, lit only by the lights from the tanks. It was all the light I needed.

In the center of the building was a huge shark tank in the shape of a cylinder. It rose almost to the ceiling. Decorated with a really neat coral reef, this tank almost took my breath away. I leaned my head back as far as it would go, and there, twenty feet above me, swam a huge sand tiger shark. The shadow it cast crept along the wall behind me like a burglar, and the first thing I did was run up the ramp, for the moment ignoring all the fish in the tanks along the wall, just so I could get an eye-to-eye look at this giant fish.

Aside from Mrs. Jones, it was probably the scariest animal I've ever seen that wasn't in a late-night horror movie. My mom told me once that monsters don't exist, but looking at this shark, I knew she'd been lying. It was at least 12 feet long, its skin silvery and full of half-healed scar tissue. As I walked along the ramp, following it, I noticed that its eyes weren't black like
most of the sharks I had seen pictures of. They were golden and had pupils. When I looked closer, leaning on the railing of the walkway, I saw that, yes, the shark was actually watching me through the (hopefully) thick glass.

But what I couldn’t get over were the shark’s jaws. Purplish gums puffed out of its mouth like grape bubble-gum. Sticking out were bunches of needle-like teeth. They were hooked, like claws almost, some half broken from a bite that must have been a bit too enthusiastic. The shark’s mouth was always open, and I knew from my books that this was so it could breathe. But from the way it was shaped, the shark’s mouth looked like it was grinning.

The other fish in the tank—mostly smaller sharks, others nervous-looking reef fish—allowed this sand tiger free passage wherever it wanted to go. None approached it and those nearby stayed at a respectful distance. I thought it might be nice to have people be that scared of you. But then I thought it might be lonely, too. Looking at the shark’s horribly-arranged teeth and gums, I was suddenly struck by the similarity between this shark and Mrs. Jones. She had purplish gums and weird, unusually pointed teeth, too. And she was always showing them off when she talked, or shouted, rather. I almost laughed out loud, imaging the shark with a bun of silver hair on its head. As if it sensed this, the shark kicked its tail and darted down into the depths of the tank.

Still chuckling, I chased after it. I named it Mrs. Jones. On my way down the spiral walkway, I got to see some of the other sharks in the tank. Spotted dogfish, lemon and blue sharks darted this way and that, while at the
bottom a few mopey nurse sharks blended in with the sandy bottom while they watched the activity above. I circled the giant tank for almost an hour, following different sharks all over the place, until I realized I only had a few minutes to look at the rest of the Aquarium before Aunt Viv picked me up. To make sure I didn’t miss anything, I decided to run laps up and down the spiral walkway, this time looking at the tanks along the walls and not the big shark tank.

I got quite a workout. After a few laps, I was completely out of breath. I’ve never been much of an athlete. Too skinny for most sports, and too short for basketball. I leaned up against the wall next to the octopus tank, panting. The sign above it said that octopuses—it said “octopi” for more than one octopus—live in very cold water, so to cool off I pressed my hand against the glass of the tank, then cooled my forehead with it. The bluish octopus stirred at the movement, gliding to a perch on the other side of the tank, its snake-like arms floating behind. I smiled. Maybe if I could convince Connie Homer I wasn’t from outer space, she could come here with me. I thought she’d like it.

It was right about then that, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a very tall man wearing a black Stetson hat standing very close behind me. The man seemed to be looking right at me, and not at the tank. I whirled around, thinking of Rob Plunk.

Nobody was there.
Even the area in the giant shark tank behind me was devoid of any fish, let alone big Man-in-Black-Stetson-Hat-shaped fish. In both directions on the ramp, nobody was around. But I had seen him! And he looked kind of familiar, too, even though I couldn't see his face. I shrugged. The only person I knew who wore Stetson hats was my dad, and he was dead. I was either seeing ghosts, or being watched by somebody with superhuman speed. The Aquarium was clearing out since it was near closing time. I looked back at the octopus. It had already curled up into a ball on its new perch.

"Jonah!"

The voice came from below, and, looking over the railing, I saw Aunt Viv at the base of the shark tank, calling my name randomly at groups of people, not a care in the world for the weird looks she was getting.


"Time to go," she called, loud enough for the whole Aquarium to hear; I couldn't help but smile. "Your ma wants you home in time for that Bible thing."

I groaned. I had forgotten that Monday was the night I had to go to Bible study.

"Yeah, I know, I know," Aunt Viv continued, "But I ain't gonna start a family feud because you want to stay here five more minutes when they're closing for the night soon anyway. Come on, now."

Reluctantly, I made my way down the ramp, this time at a walking pace, so I could get a better look at some of the tanks. One had a huge cluster
of poisonous sea anemones and clownfish. Another had sleek eels and lungfish, and another had blind cave fish—they had no eyes but they never bumped into anything because they “saw” by listening with their ears. Still others had fabulously colored crabs and lobsters.

As I reached the main floor and met up with Aunt Viv, I saw something I hadn’t noticed when I walked in. The gift shop. Inside the window was a huge poster with none other than Sid the Smiling Shark on it. Aunt Viv saw me looking at it and rolled her eyes at me.

“Come on,” she groaned, not needing to lead me into the gift shop. As we picked out the poster from a numbered rack on the wall, the lights in the tanks dimmed for the night. Aunt Viv and I were the last people to leave, and before I walked out the gate, I turned and looked behind me for one last glimpse at my many new friends. In the darkness, Mrs. Jones continued to circle her tank.
CHAPTER 7: THE FACE IN THE PICTURE

On the way to my Bible Study meeting, my mom told me her flute group would be coming over later that night. This was basically all she said to me—my mom and I haven’t talked much lately. She seems very awkward. A lot of times she’ll act like she’s about to say something important, then stop. I think it’s because she’s never told me about sex (not that I don’t know anything, understand), and she’s trying to figure out how. I dread that day. I imagine one of our heads exploding just from sheer awkwardness. So when she cleared her throat, and started to speak to me in the car, I thought it was going to be the Sex Talk. But no, it was just about the flute meeting.

My mom gets together with a group of her weird friends every once in a while, and they all attempt to play flutes. Most of them can’t even read music, so you can imagine what it sounds like. Personally, I think flutes are foul instruments. If they should be played at all, by anyone (and that’s debatable), they should definitely not be played in groups. Smothered by an entire orchestra of other, louder, instruments maybe. But a group of them alone, played by my mom and her weird friends, is pure hell. So I had a lot to look forward to on this, the night of my first day as a teenager.

The Bible Study meeting actually wasn’t that bad at first—until my second Strange Sighting of the day happened. My amazement at all the stuff I saw at the Aquarium was kind of drowned out by the image of the man in the black hat. Had I really seen him? I thought so. But I wasn’t 100% sure.
Anyway, Pastor Halford was very distracted that night. I almost thought he was going to talk to us about sex, which would have really been funny. Pastor Halford is a very round, pear-shaped man. He has black hair and a red beard. When he talks, he practically shouts the first word, then you have to strain to hear the rest of the sentence. Maybe this is so that if someone eavesdrops on him, they'd only catch the first word of everything he said. I don't know. All I know is he's one of the strangest people I know, and that's saying a lot, if you haven't noticed.

We did some group activities, and I was matched with Rod and Todd, a couple of Junior High guys who always called me "Joan," then laughed when I corrected them. We had to look at these weird drawings that supposedly had a hidden message in them. Pastor Halford told us it was a test of our faith. If we truly believed, we'd see the messages. Except he didn't say what we were looking for, so it didn't take me long to get upset with the whole thing. Between the man in the black hat, who may or may not have been trying to kidnap me at the Aquarium, to my mom's flute meeting later, I had a lot on my mind. I really didn't want to be bothered by Rod and Todd, or these stupid pictures. So I decided to have a little fun.

"Oh my god, I see it!" I said to Todd, who was holding up one of the pictures, which looked like someone spilled a bunch of paint all over it, and making spooky noises.

"What?" Rod asked, leaning forward next to me and squinting,

"Where?"
These guys are so dumb, I was thinking.

"It's a big...potato!" I said, pointing at it, and trying not to laugh, "and it's being chased by Ronald MacDonald with a pan of hot grease!"

"Are you crazy?" Todd asked, looking at the picture he was holding up, and bending it a little, "I don't see anything." But I was on a roll.

"Look!" I pointed at the picture. "When you bend it like that it looks like they're actually moving! And, oh my god, Ronald MacDonald is getting sucked into a huge flying saucer and—" I felt a meaty hand on my shoulder.

"Flying saucer?" Pastor Halford asked, taking the picture from Todd, "What's got into you, Jonah, this is a picture of our lord, Jesus Christ!"

"He's been doing this crap, uh, stuff all night, Pastor," Rod said, Todd nodding, "It's really hard for us to study. Me and Todd both saw Jesus in the picture." They smiled at the Pastor, who always believed everything they said, which was another reason I didn't like them.

"Jonah, until you learn some respect, I'm going to have you sit in the lobby with this picture, alone," Pastor Halford said.

Fine by me, I thought, better than talking to Rod and Todd all night. So I walked to the lobby and had a seat. After a while, I got bored. There really wasn't much to do in the lobby. I considered going back and telling Pastor Halford that I had learned some respect, but I'd choose boredom over Rod and Todd any day. So I looked at the picture for a while. I didn't see Jesus anywhere in it. I thought maybe it was one of those Magic Eye things,
where you have to unfocus your eyes to see the real picture. I was never any
good at those. So I figured while I was here I might as well try again.

So I unfocused my eyes and stared hard at that picture, looking
*through* the picture like the Magic Eye lady at the mall had told me. It didn’t
work. All I succeeded in doing was giving myself a headache. I threw the
picture on the ground and looked at my watch. 7:45. Fifteen minutes until
mom comes and takes me home to her flute meeting.

Just then I noticed something. Like earlier at the aquarium, it was out
of the corner of my eye, but this time it wasn’t the man in the black hat.
Something was moving in the picture. I looked down at it.

As if the picture were a window through the floor, I saw something
moving behind it, something big and black. I jumped back in my seat, still
looking at the picture on the floor. It wasn’t Jesus.

It was a dragon. A huge, black dragon, flying back and forth behind the
picture-window on the floor. The paint splotches were completely gone. I
gasped.

The dragon seemed to hear me, because it stopped, and reared back,
facing the picture-window, looking right at me. It was the most frightening
thing I’ve ever seen. Its black head had at least 10 horns all around it, and it
had yellow eyes that blazed right into the pit of my stomach. They were so
bright it was hard for me to see the rest of its face. I tried to back up, but I
was already leaning against the wall.
The dragon roared (it even sounded muffled, as if the picture really was a window through the floor), and reared back again, this time belching a giant ball of fire right at me. It was so bright that for a few seconds I couldn’t see anything. I put my hands over my eyes and tried to move away from the picture. Then my feet tripped over something on the floor and I fell with a crash.

The picture was back to normal. Just a splotchy picture lying on the floor. I had knocked over a plant, and dirt was spilled all over the carpet. I looked down the hall to see if anyone had heard the crash, but all I heard were the first words of Pastor Halford’s final prayer for the evening. Keeping an eye on the picture, I quickly swept all the dirt to the wall where I hoped it wouldn’t be noticed. Then I walked over to the picture.

Still the same old picture. Slowly, very slowly, I reached down and picked it up. No dragon. I touched it. Still nothing.

I decided right there that while my mom and her weird friends played their flutes that night, I was going to try and sort out all the strange stuff that I’d seen that day.
CHAPTER 8: FLUTE FACTORY

An hour later, locked in my room as my mom's flute group groaned out another song that sounded like some form of voodoo animal torture, I went to work sorting out all the weird events of the day. I had to admit, after the shock and fright at seeing the dragon in the picture, I was starting to like all the strange things going on. It was like being in my own real-life adventure.

The first thing I had to do was drown out the nails-on-chalkboard sound of those flutes. I have a very small collection of CDs that I keep in a shoebox. Most of them are classical. But there's one that isn't. It's Snot Factory's second album, "Booger Burger." I keep it in an old CD case for a Haydn symphony I lost. It's really not that good an album. The only song on it that I kind of like is called "Ass Scratch Fever." But right now, in the face of my mom's latest flute party, Snot Factory was my only escape. Plus, I bought the CD from Rob Plunk last year. We weren't exactly friends, but now that he was missing, I felt like I had to do something for him.

At first I just stretched out on my bed, listening to Snot Factory play "Dropped in a Meat Grinder" and "Pick Your Nose" on my headphones. Then I opened up the pad of notebook paper I keep on my bedside table (to record any cool dreams I might have) and made a list. It looked like this:

Mrs. Jones (3)
Carrie Homer's UFO stuff (6)
Rob Plunk, kidnapped? (8)
Man in Black Hat (8)
Dragon (10)
I was rating these events on a 1-10 weirdness scale, 1 being almost normal and 10 being like something out of a *Twilight Zone* episode. I guess in that respect Rob Plunk disappearing didn’t really deserve an 8, since kids run away all the time. But things like that never happen in Gungywamp. Plus, Rob Plunk’s dad ran the local record store, which gave Rob the opportunity to scam CDs and sell them to people like me and make a fortune. So I couldn’t think of any reason for him to run away. Kidnappings in Gungywamp were unheard of. But looking at my list now and seeing “Man in Black Hat” right under Rob’s name, things seemed a lot more sinister.

But none of this seemed to have anything to do with the dragon I saw. Dragons don’t go around kidnapping people. Frustrated, I threw off my headphones. Snot Factory, with all their screaming and crashing cymbals, was becoming almost as annoying as the flute group, which to my relief seemed to be finishing up. All I heard outside my door now was chatty laughter. I put my CD player away, and replaced Snot Factory in their disguised case. The only reason I bought it from Rob ($12, a rip-off in my opinion) was because I knew my mother hated them, and anything my mom hated must be cool. As far as I know, Snot Factory may be the first thing my mom and I agree on.

It was almost 9:30. My mom would make me go to bed pretty soon. In the corner of my room were the drawing supplies that I forgot to bring with me to the Aquarium this afternoon. It struck me that I might very well forget what the dragon looked like, just like I forget my dreams if I don’t write them
down as soon as I wake up. So I grabbed a drawing pad and a heavy black pencil and set to work.

It was scary even drawing it. My hand moved as if I had been drawing dragons all my life. The eyes came first, furrowed and menacing. Then the horns, the scales, the snaggle-toothed grin—I can't ever remember being able to draw this fast. My heart began pounding. I half-expected my drawing to start moving just like the picture at Bible Study, but it didn't. I shaded it in so black the pencil-lead shined on the page. As I scribbled, my pencil finally broke in half.

I looked down at the drawing. It was easily the most frightening thing I had ever drawn. More than any shark, moray eel, or devil-ray. Shuddering, I could almost hear it cackle behind its toothy sneer. This one was definitely not going to be a porthole.

"Jonah!"

My mom pounding on my door nearly made me wet my pants. I covered up my dragon picture and put the art-pad back on my desk.

“What?” I called through the door.

“It’s time for bed, hon, come out and say goodnight to everyone.”

I sighed. I knew from experience that my mom’s Flute Friends were notorious face-pincherers. They also had a fondness for using the word “cute” in high, squeaky voices. Taking a deep breath, I opened my bedroom door to face them.
CHAPTER 9: THE VOICE IN THE DRAIN

I was in the middle of a really great dream where I was swimming through my underwater world with Miss Barth, when a voice that sounded like it was right next to my ear woke me up.

"Pssst, hey you," it said, and I jumped so fast I nearly fell out of my bed. I looked around my room. Nothing out of the ordinary. The light from my 20-gallon fish tank showed me that my room was exactly as I had left it when I went to bed. I pressed the light button on my watch—2:11 AM. In the room next door, my mom was snoring. My mom sounds like she's drowning when she snores. It's not so much the noise that usually bothers me, but the worry that she might choke to death that usually keeps me awake.

I slammed my head back on the pillow. I always had a hard time getting back to sleep late at night, mostly because of mom's snoring. Rolling over, I discovered that on top of everything, I had to go to the bathroom, too. So I threw back the covers and headed for the bathroom, stopping on my way to throw a few flakes in for my fish.

On my way back, making sure that I stepped hard on the creaky spot near my door (noises sometimes stop my mom's snoring—I've resorted to knocking books off shelves before), I noticed my wallet lying on the floor near my bed. It had fallen open. Frowning, I picked it up, and was about to put it back on the bedside table when I realized that my membership card was missing. Searching all the pockets of my wallet, including the secret one behind the seam, revealed nothing. The card was gone.
I looked around the room again. For some reason, my eyes fell on the poster of Sid the Smiling Shark that Aunt Viv bought for me. It was hanging on the wall near the bedroom door. Something was wrong. I walked over to it, expecting Sid to wink at me again, like he had at my birthday party the day before. Nope, just the usual Sid. When I shrugged and turned back around, I stopped dead in my tracks.

The poster had moved.

The blank spot above my fish tank was where I had hung the poster only hours before. At some point between then and now, someone had moved the poster to where it was now, by the door. I turned back around to face it.

With a sharp masking-tape sound, the poster fell to the floor. I jumped back. Next door, my mom made a snuffling sound, then continued snoring.

I looked around my room again, to see if anything else was out of place (or, if there was some intruder lurking in the shadows). Everything seemed to be fine, so I bent down to pick up the poster.

It had moved.

Not much, but I knew it hadn't fallen where it now was lying. It had fallen on the floor between my bed and the bedroom door, which was half-open. Now it was lying on the floor between the door and the hallway. It had moved.

As if Sid were swimming toward the hallway.

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, wondering if I was still dreaming. Didn’t feel like it. When I opened my eyes, the poster had moved
again—now it was almost entirely out in the hallway. From the next room, my mom let out a harsh, barking snore.

Then, faintly, from the bathroom, came the voice.

"I'm in here," it said.

The voice sounded friendly enough, although that's how Officer Patton described "dangerous strangers." Friendly. I considered waking my mom up, then thought the better or it. The last time I woke her up in the middle of the night I had been sleepwalking. She had found me in the kitchen, throwing all her pots and pans out the front door (to this day I have no idea why).

But this time I was pretty sure I wasn't sleepwalking. I looked around the dimly lit room for some kind of a weapon. All I could find was the Exacto knife I used to cut out my porthole drawings. When I picked it up I noticed that the picture of the dragon I had drawn had been sliced out. It was gone, just like the membership card. Someone had definitely been in my room.

"Any time, Jonah," the voice from the bathroom called, louder this time. It had a strange gurgling quality to it. I was definitely more scared than I had ever been in my entire life, that much was certain. I tightened my grip on the knife and walked to the hallway, stepping carefully over the poster of Sid the Smiling Shark, who was now completely out of my bedroom. I must have misjudged where it was lying, because I brushed my ankle against a corner, and it gave me a painful paper-cut. If this was a dream, it was the most realistic one I've ever had.
As I passed my mom’s room in the hallway, I reconsidered waking her up. I was almost positive I wasn't sleepwalking, and the fact that I was standing there thinking about it made sleepwalking even less likely. Still, I was too big to be waking her up to investigate noises, even if they were gurgling voices from the bathroom. I was a teenager now, not a little kid. My mom kept on snoring, and I moved on down the hall.

The bathroom door was closed (had I shut it?), so I took a deep breath, and in one quick movement opened it and switched on the light.

Empty. Everything was just as I had left it. As a matter of fact, I noticed that I had left the toilet seat up again (mom always yells at me about that, then goes on a tirade about “men”), so I set it back down again. Just in case, I checked the bathtub, wielding my Exacto knife. Also empty. My heartbeat finally beginning to slow down, I headed for the door.

That’s when I saw my membership card in the sink.

I put the knife down on the toilet seat, and reached into the sink for my card. It seemed to be stuck to the drain by something. I pulled on it, hard, but it stayed firm. So I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big yank. With a loud thhhhh-uckk! sound, the card came free.

Then the drain, like a vacuum-cleaner, sucked me down under the sink.
CHAPTER 10: UNDER THE SINK

As soon as the shock at being somehow sucked into a drain wore off, I was amazed at how easy it was. I mean, here was a skinny but otherwise normal 13-year-old getting pulled through a drain-pipe the size of a quarter. For the first few seconds, I couldn’t see anything, but I could move my arms and legs around, so either the drain suddenly got a lot bigger or I had gotten a lot smaller just after I grabbed my membership card.

The card! Even though I couldn’t see, I could still feel the card in my left hand. I held on to it as hard as I could as I felt myself being pulled downward. It almost felt like I was underwater, except that I could breathe.

After a few seconds, the pulling seemed to slow down. Now I was just drifting. I wished it could be brighter so I could see just where I was. One thing was for sure, I definitely wasn’t in the bathroom anymore.

“Well, then, why don’t you open your eyes?” a voice right beside me said. I was so startled by the voice that I immediately did open my eyes.

And there before me, all around me, was the sea, brimming with life. It wasn’t dark at all. Actually, it was so bright I had to squint while my eyes adjusted. A school of yellow Tang fish tickled the bottoms of my dangling feet, and I giggled. Far below, I could see the blurred shadows of the rocky ocean floor, and directly above me was a small circle of bright white light. The light cascaded down on everything like water from a shower-head.

And there, floating next to me, was Sid the Smiling Shark.
"There you go, I was starting to think you hurt your eyes," he said, and with a flip of his tail glided around me, striking his famous membership-card/poster-pose.

I laughed out loud, and bubbles rose from my mouth. I was under water! I was going to drown! Horrified, I kicked and flailed upwards, realizing the light above was way too far away. Then the light was obscured by Sid, looking down on me with a smug, sharky grin.

"You're not drowning, you've been breathing fine for the last five minutes," he said, lightly slapping me with one of his front fins. I stopped trying to swim and, closing my eyes, took a breath. Instead of choking, I breathed in like normal. Actually, whatever it was I was breathing made my whole body feel warm and relaxed. I opened my eyes to see Sid practicing a figure-eight (which looked more like a figure-three).

"Weird at first, isn't it?" Sid said.

I nodded.

"Yeah, I said, giggling a little as bubbles flew from my mouth, "it feels a little heavier than air, but not like water at all."

"Just hang on to that card," Sid said, pointing his tail at my left hand, "That's what's doing it." Sid tried the figure-eight again—he still didn't have it.

"The card?" I asked, looking at it in my hand.

"Sure. See, most people get these fancy Gold Memberships that give you all these extra things, but really only cost more. What they don't know is
that the *regular* memberships, the ones for people who *really* just want to see all the fish, those come with special perks of their own.”

“Like this?” I asked, pointing around us.

Sid laughed, which since he was a shark, sounded more like a hiccup.

“No, not always. This is special,” he said.

I frowned, wondering if I was about to become Sid’s midnight-snack.

“Why?” I asked.

Sid hiccuped again, and gave me a startled look (which, again, because he was a shark, looked more like he had something caught in his throat).

“Well, haven’t you recognized all this? This is your world!”

For a second I didn’t know what Sid was talking about, but when I looked around again I almost hiccuped myself. I was swimming in the sea behind my porthole drawings! While I was talking to Sid, I had drifted further down, so now I could clearly see the bottom. There was the castle-like formation of rocks I had drawn last year and, next to it, a group of dark caves with hundreds of neon fish darting in and out, lighting them up. Behind me was the sunken pirate ship that had become home to a family of eels. As I looked around at the world around me, all the fish I saw, even the eels (who, according to the books I’ve read, normally keep to themselves) swam up to me.

“Thank you so much!” said each of the neon fish as they passed me by.

“Thanks,” mumbled each member of the shy eel family, who quickly slithered back to their ship.
“Thank you,” said each Tang fish from the school I almost fell into when I first arrived. The fish were still thanking me when my feet touched the sandy bottom. I looked up at Sid, who was still circling above, trying to get that figure-eight down pat.

“What are they thanking me for, Sid?” I called up to him.

“For this,” he replied simply, “For creating this world for them.”

And with that, Sid nailed his first figure-eight of the night.
CHAPTER 11: THE GRAND TOUR

It took a while for it all to sink in. In the meantime, Sid continued practicing his figure-eights above me, and the rest of the undersea population kept swimming by, thanking me, down to the last little minnow. When it was all over, the fish all returned to their everyday business of swimming around, and Sid glided down to where I sat on the ocean floor.

“So, what do you think?” he asked me. It was funny—even though he was a very real shark, he still looked a little like a cartoon, just like he was drawn on the poster and membership card.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” I said, grinning. Sid waved a fin at me.

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” he said, “Come on, follow me.”

I found swimming much easier than I expected. You’d think that a 13-year-old kid would have trouble keeping up with a shark, a fish that was made for swimming. Me, I don’t know what I was made for. But I was able to keep up just fine. It was almost as if the water was thinner in this world, making it almost as if I was flying in zero gravity.

“You’ll get even better at it, too. Just like in your dreams—just like Aqua-Man,” Sid said. He was reading my mind again.

“How do you do that?” I called up to him, even though I could have just as easily thought it. I had caught up to Sid by now, and was swimming beside him. He grinned, again looking more cartoon than shark.

“You might pick that up eventually, too,” he said.
As we swam along the sandy ocean floor, Sid narrated everything we passed, like he was a tour-guide. He didn't need to—I knew what everything was—but I didn't mind hearing it, either.

"Over here," Sid pointed, "is the entrance to the caves you made for the blind cave fish—they really appreciate that, by the way, if they didn't already tell you."

"They did," I assured Sid, looking down through the layer of pipes and rocks that I had designed for these solitary creatures. I remembered modeling it after the crazy arrangement of the old New York sewer system I had seen in a book—I had pipes going every direction at once, over, under, and through each other, and here and there I put open areas, like meeting rooms. I got the idea for that from those hamster cages with all the tubes I always see at the pet stores.

"Oh, the cave fish don't use those meeting areas much," Sid said as we continued on our trip, "They're too shy, they stick to the pipes and tunnels. So since those meeting areas weren't being used, I rented most of them out to some sea anemone friends of mine who needed a favor."

"Rented?" I asked.

"Sure," Sid said, "A shark's gotta make a living somehow."

Just then, we swam over a hill on the ocean floor, and what was spread before me nearly took my breath away.

It was a city.
Not just the little rock formations and arrangements I had drawn in my portholes, but a real city. It was mostly made out of coral. Thin coral skyscrapers (or seascrapers) reached for the surface, surrounded by hundreds of smaller coral structures. Crabs, eels, catfish, and other bottom dwellers raced every which way between them above the sandy streets. In the middle of the city stood the one thing I remembered drawing—the stadium. I had gotten the idea when the Gungywamp football team tore down their old stadium and built a new one. They had nowhere to put the old one, so they just dumped it into the ocean a few miles out, where they said it would become a coral reef. So I had drawn that broken old stadium in one of my portholes, covering it with all kinds of colorful coral. And now here it was—the centerpiece of an underwater city.

It was even lit up like a real city. Tiny, glowing Tinafore anemones hung from streetlight-shaped coral stalks along the roads, and thousands of them were clustered in the stadium’s light towers, showing it off in all its glory.

"Yeah, those Tinafores are a big help," Sid told me as we headed down one of the main streets toward the stadium, "I’ve got ’em set up real nice in the Plaza Towers." He pointed to an elegant looking coral-building off to our left. All the windows had coral terraces, and outside was a large park filled with neatly-trimmed seaweed gardens and even a huge bubble-fountain. I noticed a few Tinafore anemones slowly walking in and out of the building on their hundreds of suction-cup feet, and some others relaxing on their
luxurious-looking terraces. As we passed, some of them nodded a few of their many eyes at me, but I noticed more than one give Sid a nasty look.

"Oh, they're just upset that I didn't give them a raise, that's all," Sid said as we passed the Plaza Towers by. I was starting to get the idea that Sid wasn't telling me the complete truth. And I was also getting tired of him reading my mind, so I concentrated on burying my thoughts as best I could.

We continued on down Main Street, and I enjoyed an ovation of applause from most of the crabs and mollusks that were scurrying around the street. Finally, we reached the main gate of the Stadium, which apparently was where Sid was taking me.

"So, what do you think?" he asked, grinning proudly.

"It's fantastic!" I said to him, still looking around, anxious to explore the side-streets. "Did you build all this?" Sid laughed.

"I designed it, yeah—over your original design of the stadium, of course. I hope you approve." Sid didn't wait for me to answer. "More is being built every day. I've got the construction crews working on some new coral complexes, and I'm having talks with two Manta Ray families about using them as airlifts to the outer suburbs...I mean, ah, to your original towns." Sid gestured with his head out to the area we came from. I nodded. It certainly seemed that my new friend Sid the Smiling Shark was some kind of gangster, overseeing this city. I was very glad shark fins weren't equipped for handling machine-guns.
“So, does this city have a name?” I asked. Sid smiled proudly—I guess he looked like a nice enough gangster.

“Atlantis City,” he said.
CHAPTER 12: ATLANTIS CITY

We entered the main gates of the coral-stadium, which Sid had renamed the Atlantis City Entertainment Center. The whole place was grown over with a neat kind of brain-coral that had thousands of hidey-holes and tunnels inside it for different fish to live in. The tunnels and holes came in different sizes, too. As we walked in the main entrance, I could see that the stadium’s seats were covered in a thin layer of coral, which many of the smaller, timid fish took refuge underneath. I could see several neon heads poke out of holes in the coral crust to look at us. In the ticket area and main walkway the coral was big and bulky, and housed eels and larger fish. It was guarded by dozens of goon-like lobsters, one of which came right up to me and Sid.

“This the kid?” the lobster said, its eye-stalks looking me over. Sid swam around us, beaming.

“You got it,” he said to the lobster. “Louie, I’d like you to meet Jonah Crabtree.”

Louie the Lobster stuck out one of his pinchers to me, and I hesitantly shook it. I don’t know what I was afraid of. As long as Sid was around, I figured, I should be safe. However, looking at Louie made me wonder exactly how safe I’d be if we were alone.

“Glad to know ya, kid,” Louie said, then, popping what looked like a cigar into his mouth, immediately began yammering to Sid in what I think was English, but really fast and with a thick accent that I couldn’t quite place.
Sid continued swimming up and down the main entrance area, nodding every now and then during Louie’s tirade.

In the meantime, I examined the stadium a little closer. It looked like every inch of the place was not only covered in all kinds of neat-looking coral, but also home to thousands of fish of all sizes. I got the impression by looking at a giant lump of brain coral on one of the nearby bleachers that I was being watched by a hundred pairs of eyes. It was kind of unnerving.

I suddenly noticed that Louie had stopped talking. I turned around and found both Louie and Sid looking at me. This definitely made me uneasy.

“Oh, don’t worry about me and Louie,” Sid said, reminding me that I needed to keep blocking my thoughts unless I wanted him reading them, “We’re not going to do anything to you—we’ve just got a, um,” Sid looked at the ceiling, searching for the right word.

“Problem?” I offered. I wasn’t sure, but I almost thought I caught Louie flexing his exoskeleton.

“Yeah, that’s right, like the kid says,” Louie said, then shared a look with Sid.

“Okay, so what is it?” I asked, exasperated. I mean, if I had created all this for them, the least they could do was clue me in. As I raised my voice, I noticed several of the other lobster-goons move toward us. I didn’t like this at all.

“Tell you what, let me take you to my office, and I’ll explain everything,” Sid told me, beckoning with a fin toward the open stadium area.
Now, despite my overwhelmingly bad feeling about all of this, the last thing I wanted to do was stay behind with Louie and his goons. So I nodded to Louie and swam off behind Sid. Behind me, I heard Louie bark something at one of the other lobsters.
CHAPTER 13: THE UNDERWORLD

As we swam over what used to be the Gungywamp Municipal Stadium playing field, Sid couldn’t help but continue being the tour-guide.

“And what I’ve got here is basically the Entertainment Capital of the City, this is where all the high-rollers come, and of course I keep ‘em set up real nice in the Coral Suites,” he said, pointing to a series of ritzy coral complexes, all bustling with activity from Neon and Glow-light Tetras as well as a bunch of serious-looking Oscars.

“What do you mean, ‘entertainment,’” I asked Sid, pointing to the coral floor, “Nothing seems to be going on here.” Sid smiled, and winked, just like on the membership card.

“That’s ‘cause all the action is *underneath,*” he said, and dived down a big hole in the coral that was disguised in seaweed. Why not, I figured, and dived in after him.

For probably the third time since falling into this world, what I saw left me speechless. If Las Vegas fell into the ocean, Sid’s place is what it would look like. The ceiling, which was really the underside of the coral crust we had just been swimming over, was jammed full of glowing Tinafore anemones, swaying to the beat of a funky-looking crustacean band called The Exos. The Exos were pretty good, and the King Crab guitarist gave me and Sid a nod as we passed them by. I gave the band a thumbs-up, and they immediately went into a wild rendition of “Rock Lobster.”
Aside from the band, virtually every inch of the place was jammed with all kinds of sea-creatures, most of them at various gambling tables. Some shot craps using box-shaped mollusks as dice. Others were playing roulette around a giant starfish who acted as both the dealer and the wheel. Everyone was wearing sunglasses and chewing on those weird cigars that I assumed were made out of seaweed. It was without a doubt the coolest place I had ever been in. I was so caught up in it all that I lost sight of Sid.

“Try yer luck?” a floating Sea-horse asked me, beckoning to a flat rock-table. A bored-looking Sea-cucumber and a couple Blue crabs were already sitting at it.

“What’s the game?” I asked, trying not to act like this was my first time in a Casino. A giant fin slapped down on my shoulder, startling me.

“It’s poker,” Sid, who had snuck up behind me, said, “and we don’t have time for that right now. Right this way.” Smiling as always, Sid led me to what looked like a wall. I was about to ask him what was up when two burly lobsters, like Louie’s goons only bigger, dug their claws into the ground and slammed their shoulders into it. The wall gave way, revealing a secret door. Even though he was obviously not carrying anything, I thought I saw Sid slip something to the two lobsters who, dusting themselves off, thanked him and headed for the nearest craps table. Sid ushered me inside his office.

Unlike the fancy Casino area, Sid’s office was pretty simple. Basically it was a circular area, big enough for him to swim around in, with a desk-shaped
rock in the middle. I wasn’t sure what the desk was for since Sid was a shark, but I didn’t ask.

“So, did you draw anything last night?” Sid asked me, getting right down to business, though what business it was I had no idea. I thought back to the night before, realizing that I was getting used to this underwater world very fast: thinking about the real world seemed very strange to me.

“You, sure,” I told Sid, “So, what’s this all about?” Sid shook his head.

“Well, we’ve got a problem, Jonah. Can you remember exactly what you drew?”

For a second I almost couldn’t remember. Then it all came back to me in a flood.

“A dragon,” I said, stammering a little, “I drew a dragon that I—” Again, Sid smiled, but it was a friendly smile, I thought.

“That you saw in a picture?” he asked softly. I nodded. By this time I had drifted to the bottom of Sid’s office, and it was at this time that I discovered the desk was for me. Who else? I took a seat. It felt good, after all that swimming.

Sid swam down to my level.

“Do you understand why that’s a problem?” he asked.

Suddenly it all became clear. Everything in my drawings was down here, under the sink. A horrible thought came to me.

“It’s not here, is it?” I asked, leaning forward.
“I’m afraid so,” Sid said, “We need your help to get rid of it. You have to—"

A thunderous crash came from overhead. The little Tinfoil anemones in Sid’s light fixture scampered off in terror as the entire place shook as if Godzilla were attacking.

“Is that it?” I screamed at Sid. “Is that the dragon?” But it was too loud for Sid to answer me. With a grimace of determination, Sid backed up to one of his office walls and shot forward, ramming his head into the opposite wall, revealing a dark passageway. I really had to talk to Sid about his secret-door-opening methods.

“In here, quick!” he yelled. I looked at the secret passage and before I could decide what to do it reached forward and swallowed me.
CHAPTER 14: DRAWER’S BLOCK

I felt shocked, like someone had slapped me. For the first few seconds I gasped huge breaths of air, as if I had been breathing through a straw for the last hour and only now could breathe normally again. I felt cold and damp all over.

When my eyes adjusted to the darkness I realized I was out. Not just out of the underwater world underneath the sink. Out. As in outside my house. In the mud.

It was drizzling, and cold, and the sky was still dark. I checked my watch, but the digital readout was blank. Everything was quiet. I figured it was about an hour or so before dawn.

I was a mess. I shook my head. The last thing I remembered was Sid telling me that I had to do something to help them get rid of the dragon. The rain came down harder. I figured standing around getting wetter wouldn’t help anybody, so I scampered to the front door.

It was locked. That was weird. I didn’t have the key on me. I felt the pockets of my muddy pajamas. No key. The rain was really coming down now—I was getting drenched. A stray cat, taking refuge underneath our porch, yowled at me. I ran around to the back of the house. The back door was locked, too, but mom always kept an extra key under a special rock my dad had made before he died. The rock looked normal, but my dad had hollowed it out with a chisel. I turned the rock over, took out the key, and let myself in, putting the key back under the rock.
The house was silent. Good. Whatever time it was, mom wasn’t up yet. Through the window behind me, the sky was starting to lighten a little, so it was getting close to dawn.

I was soaked. Good thing the back door leads into the kitchen. I grabbed a couple dish towels and made myself dry enough so that I wouldn’t soak the carpet on my way upstairs.

Mom was still snoring in her room. I crept into the bathroom and turned on the light. Everything was just as I had left it. I picked up the Exacto knife I had left and headed for my bedroom, locking the door behind me.

My clock-radio read 5:45AM. I had been gone a long time. Or, I had sleepwalked for a long time. But wait, I couldn’t have been walking in my sleep—I didn’t have a key with me! How could I get outside and lock the doors behind me without a key? A window? No, unless I was much less clumsy when I’m sleepwalking (doubtful) there was no way I’d be able to climb out a window without killing myself or making enough noise to wake the whole neighborhood. Somehow, the secret passage in Sid’s office had dumped me right outside my house.

I collapsed onto the floor. I was exhausted. I felt like I hadn’t slept at all (I really hadn’t). But there was too much going on inside my head for me to sleep now. Besides, mom would be getting ready for work in less than an hour. I yawned. How was I supposed to help Sid with the dragon when I was here?
Next to me on the floor was the list of strange events I had written out before going to bed. I definitely had some things to add to it. I picked it up, and quickly scribbled:

- Sink drain=gate to porthole world (Atlantis City)
- Sid the Shark—gangster??
- Louie the Lobster--???
- Dragon from picture attacking??
- What I draw goes directly to Atlantis City???

I shook my head again. I needed sleep. I put the notepad down and looked at the porthole drawings around my room. Everything looked normal. Even Sid’s poster was back on the wall (although I had no idea who put it there, but I was willing to let that slide for now).

Then I came to the porthole of the Stadium.

There, hovering above Atlanti Central, was what looked like a huge black cloud. I looked closer, turning on my bedside light. It was the dragon. Flames were belching out of its mouth down onto the stadium, and I could see thousands of fish and other sea creatures scattering for their lives. This was not the picture I had drawn. But looking closely at it, you couldn’t tell.

I looked at the porthole for a long time, waiting to see if the picture would start to move, like the one at the Bible Study meeting. It didn’t. I tore it off the wall and turned it upside down so I wouldn’t have to look at it.

I had to do something. My eyes fell on my stack of drawing supplies in the corner of my room. Something clicked inside my head. I could re-draw
the dragon, but this time draw him inside a cage! Whatever I drew came through under the sink, right? I grabbed the art pad and a soft-lead pencil.

Wait. That wouldn’t work. Drawing the dragon again inside the cage would only create another dragon. Of course, the second dragon would be in a cage, but that didn’t help things with the other dragon, did it? I suddenly realized that I was going to have to be very careful about what I drew from now on.

Okay, so I couldn’t re-draw the dragon. Maybe I could create something to kill the dragon? But what? My mind was a blank. I looked at the picture I had taken from my wall. Maybe I could draw a cage around the dragon? I shook my head. That wouldn’t work. In the picture, the dragon seemed to be hovering, but that was just because it was one picture. From the way it’s tail was arced, it looked like it was in the middle of circling the stadium, dropping firebombs all the way. I reached for the picture and turned it over to study it again.

The dragon was gone. The stadium was in ruins.

I leaned back against my bed, tears welling in my eyes. It was all my fault.
CHAPTER 15: MORNING

When I woke up, I felt awful. My mom was making a racket in the kitchen—she usually does that instead of trying to talk me out of bed. It sounded like she was banging pots and pans together, and each time they hit my head ached. I was dizzy, and filthy—the mud had dried to a crust all over my pajamas. I've heard about people getting hangovers from drinking too much, and that's just what I felt like. I groaned.

"Jonah, are you up yet?" my mom called from the kitchen, then dropped what sounded like a wok on the floor.

"Unghhh," I answered, trying to sound awake and raring to go. For some reason, my pathetic attempt worked.

"Okay, your breakfast is on the stove—you better eat it!" she warned.

I am not a Breakfast Person. I am not an Eating Person. I eat only because I have to. I'd much prefer it if I could survive on Orange Julisues. I love to drink. As long as it has a lot of sugar in it. But eating, especially in the morning, is not my thing. Especially when I feel like I've been guzzling whiskey in a saloon for 48 hours straight.

"Un-ngunhhh," I called back to my mom, who, apparently satisfied, threw a few more things around the kitchen, and left for work.

You might think that, because my mom has to leave for work before I have to leave for school, that I'd skip school a lot. Well, I really don't. I don't know why. Whenever I do, I'm always much more bored than when I'm actually in school. And spending the day outside, browsing the bookstores or
whatever, just has always seemed too risky. I didn’t want to get caught. So you can call me a fraidy-cat if you want, I don’t care. That’s just the way things were.

Except, on this day, I really didn’t feel up to going to school.

After my mom left, I walked around the house for a while (after I carefully threw my breakfast in the trash, hidden under a wad of paper towels so my mom wouldn’t find it). I raided my mom’s medicine cabinet, and took two of the biggest pain relief pills I could find. After an hour of more walking around the house, the throbbing in my head started to go away. I felt good enough to drink some orange juice.

As I sipped, sitting on the couch, I decided school could wait a day for me. I looked at the clock. 9:15AM. Mrs. Jones would probably be giving our spelling test right about now. I shook my head. I had more important things to be thinking of. First on the list was how to save Atlantis City.

I rubbed my head. I couldn’t think of anything. Even though I still didn’t think it would work, the only thing I could think of was drawing another picture of the dragon, only with a cage surrounding it. I returned to my bedroom.

The picture of the stadium still was on the floor—and the attacking dragon was still missing. Well, I figured, if I draw another one, there can’t be two, can there? I picked up my art pad and a pencil.

I couldn’t draw. I put the pencil to the paper, and tried to envision the dragon I had seen, but nothing came. I started doodling, but all I could come
up with were a few curly-cue lines. No dragon. I was stumped. I threw down my art pad and returned to the living room, grabbing my coat.

I knew I might very well get caught, but the Aquarium was dark, and as long as I stuck to the side roads, and the bus drivers didn’t ask me why I wasn’t in school, I figured I had a chance. If they caught me, I’d plea temporary insanity. With my story, they’d be sure to believe me. Checking my wallet for my membership card—Sid the Shark once again winked at me, so I figured I was at least on the right track—I walked out my front door to play hookey.
CHAPTER 16: SNOW DAY

When I stepped outside, I was almost blinded. I took a couple steps forward, and promptly slipped and fell on my ass. Dazed, I looked around, squinting out the glare.

It had snowed.

Not much. A good two or three inches. Still weird considering when I had woken up outside the house just before dawn it had been raining.

I heard some other kids, younger ones, laughing and playing up the street. My eyes were starting to adjust to the snow-glare, so I picked myself up and looked up and down my street.

A group of kids from Mr. Meaney's 4th Grade class (he's actually a pretty nice guy, despite his name) were playing a snow-game of nerf football across the street. Down by the corner, another group was having a snowball fight.

"I'll be damned," I said aloud, and dashed back into the house.

It wasn't unusual for my mom to miss something like the fact that there was snow on the ground and school might be cancelled. What with her flutes and her job at the church (she types up the sermon programs), she's got a lot on her mind, I guess.

Once I was back inside the house, I turned on the TV. Sure enough, across the bottom of the screen scrolled those wonderful words:
GUNGYWAMP PUBLIC SCHOOLS CANCELLED....
There’s nothing quite like the feeling of an unexpected snow-day. Especially when, like now, I had to save Atlantis from destruction. As I looked up Aunt Viv’s phone number in my mom’s thin address book, I wondered if it was possible that Sid had somehow fixed it so that it would snow. Hey, after the last couple days, anything was possible.

Aunt Viv was sleeping when I called her—she’s retired, and she tells me she’s always staying up late watching the History Channel. I guess that’s what retired people do. So after she chewed me out for calling “in the dead of night,” she finally calmed down and agreed to drive me to the Aquarium around lunchtime.

After I hung up, I sat back down in front of the TV—apparently schools were only closed in our area, nobody else was hit very bad. It was almost 10AM. Two hours until Aunt Viv would get here. I was starting to get hungry, so I decided to make myself a peanut butter and chocolate syrup sandwich, then go out for a walk. In a lot of the mystery novels I’ve read, the sleuth often comes up with a case-cracking idea when he’s out for a walk. Sherlock Holmes, the best of them all, played the violin when he was stumped, but since I didn’t have one, and I wasn’t about to mess with my mom’s flutes, I figured a good walk couldn’t hurt.

As I fixed my sandwich, something on the TV news caught my attention. A picture of some girl, who I recognized as the person who came up with the great idea of mixing spitballs with super-glue, was on the screen. I
grabbed the remote and turned up the volume, chocolate syrup dripping down my face.

"--no other victim of what is now a string of kidnappings in the Gungywamp area. Liz Bath, a sixth grader at Gungywamp Elementary, didn't come home from school yesterday. She was last seen walking home by a few of her classmates, none of whom know where she might have gone. With me now is Officer Dale Patton of the Gungywamp Police force. Officer Patton, is this the work of the same—"

I turned the TV off, and left the soggy remains of my sandwich for later. Before leaving for my walk, I went back to my bedroom and grabbed my Exacto knife.
CHAPTER 17: THE SWAMP

They didn't call our town Gungywamp for nothing. One of my teachers used to tell us that we had more swamps per square mile than any other city except for a few in Florida. I guess everybody needs to take pride in something.

I wandered aimlessly for a while, enjoying the rubbery crunch of snow under my shoes, and before long I was walking along the edge of one of these swamps. I was still a little nervous after the kidnapping announcement on the news, so I kept my hands in my pockets, one of them gripping the blade button on my Exacto knife. But after a while the fact that it was a snow day seemed to push almost everything out of my mind, even Atlantis City. I strolled off the sidewalk a ways and entered a wooded area that led to the swamp, grabbing some snow from a tree stump and making it into a snowball.

The swamps really aren't that swampy in the wintertime. Most of the muck is frozen over. And, really, despite what my teacher says, they're really not all that swampy to begin with. I've seen pictures of the Okefenoke swamp in Florida. That's a swamp. You could fit Gungywamp and 10 other cities just like it in there and still get lost. The swamps around here are just low places that collect a lot of rain and gunk. Anyway, the snow had covered and frozen over most of the really swampy patches, so I didn't have to worry about getting too muddy while I looked for a good thick tree to practice my snowball-aim.

Just as I was winding up, someone tackled me from behind.
If you've never been forced to taste swamp-snow, consider yourself very lucky. Whatever it is that makes swamps swampy really doesn't taste very good. As I skidded on the wet ground, snow getting under my coat and up my shirt, I got a good mouthful of snow and guck.

I rolled over, reaching inside my coat pocket for my knife to face my attacker.

It was Carrie Homer.

"Gotcha!" she said, towering over me, and dropped two handfuls of snow on my face. I scrambled up, blushing like crazy, and like a flash she took off into the woods.

"Hey!" I yelled, and started after her. She was pretty fast, and I hoped she knew where she was going, because as soon as the road was out of sight everything looked the same (trees, snow, mud) to me.

Pretty soon the mud got thinner and we came to a clearing by a creek. Carrie Homer was leaning against a tree, laughing and slapping her knee. I tried not to huff and puff too loudly, but the fact was I hadn't run more than across the street for a long time. I'm not exactly athletic.

"You should've seen your face!" she was laughing, but not in a mean, bully way. A kind of nice way. "I bet you thought I was the kidnapper or something!"

"No," I said, even though she was right, "You just, ah, you just—caught me off guard, that's all." Eventually Carrie stopped laughing.
“Aren’t you going to get me back?” she asked, smirking. I started blushing again, it was really annoying.

“I’m a pacifist,” I said, not exactly knowing why. Maybe it was because I had done a report on Ghandi a couple months ago.

“So, if I, like, shoved you into the creek...” Carrie mused.

“Well, then I’d have to make you eat your weight in snow,” I said, and Carrie laughed. I was a little surprised. Girls usually don’t laugh at things I say, unless they’re picking on me or something. Jokes I tell usually end up being on me. But this was something new. I laughed, too. She had a nice laugh.

Still out of breath, I plopped down on a dry spot underneath a tree. The Exacto knife fell out of my coat pocket.

“And he carries a switchblade, too,” Carrie said, still grinning, “I don’t know about you. Maybe you’re the kidnapper.” I smiled.

“It’s not a switchblade, it’s an Exacto knife, like a razor blade. I use it for my, uh, pictures,” I said, feeling dumb saying this. But she didn’t seem to notice.

“Okay, whatever, Mister Pacifist,” she said, getting down on her hands and knees and beginning to root through the weeds by the creek.

“So, what’re you doing here?” I asked, after the silence started to get to me.

“Lookin’ for snakes,” she said, “haven’t found any, must be too cold.”
It was getting kind of cold, especially since I had snow down my shirt from when she tackled me.

"More pets?" I asked.

"No, actually I make soup out of them, want some?" she asked, sticking her tongue out at me. An idea was brewing in my mind as I remembered our written conversation during the school assembly. I considered telling her about all the strange stuff that was going on. Being a UFO believer, she was bound to believe me. But for some reason I didn’t feel comfortable telling her here, especially since I was really starting to get cold. I stood up.

"Ever seen a sea-snake?" I asked.

"A what?"

"A sea-snake. Or a Moray eel, they’re pretty cool, too. They’re like underwater snakes, and they can swim really good. I mean, they’re not slow and clumsy like regular snakes," I stopped. Oops. But Carrie stood up from her weed-hunting and stuck her tongue out at me again. "I mean, not that—"

"Sea snakes, huh?" she said. I nodded. She was the first person who didn’t break up laughing after I went off about some sea-creature or another.

"They have a bunch of them down at the public Aquarium. My Aunt’s picking me up to go down there in a little while. You wanna come along?" I said it before I even realized that this was the closest I have ever come to asking a girl out on a date. I think she saw me blushing because she started smirking again.
“Sure,” Carrie Homer said, “I gotta clean up first. Come on, my house is just over the hill here.”
I had to chase after Carrie Homer again as she raced along the edge of the creek, over a small hill, and through what I supposed was her backyard. She beat me to her house by at least 100 feet, but she didn’t make fun of me as I wheezed up to her. Her house was on stilts, but other than that it was pretty normal-looking. I followed her up some stairs to the front porch, still a little winded, expecting her to make some comment on me being beaten by a girl. But she still didn’t. She just stuck her tongue out at me again and opened a sliding glass door to let us into her house.

Her house was without a doubt the cleanest place I’ve ever seen. Everything was white, like a hospital, even the carpet. Most of the tables were made out of glass, and everything was arranged like out of some magazine. I looked at Carrie, then at myself. We were both pretty dirty.

“My dad’s kind of a neat-freak,” Carrie said, “Here, leave your shoes on this.” She pointed to a clear plastic mat next to the sliding door. Carrie set her soaked and dirty sneakers next to a pair of fancy, new-looking slippers. I kicked off my shoes and followed Carrie through the living room and down a flight of stairs to the basement.

“I pretty much live down here,” she said to me as we descended the stairs, “My dad wanted me to take a room upstairs, but I did that at our last house, and the whole clean thing just got to me. My dad pretty much sticks to the upstairs part of the house.”
We reached the basement, and I could immediately tell it was her room. It wasn’t filthy, but it definitely looked well-used. Crates filled with books like *Alien Conspiracies and You* and *Your Reptiles Have Feelings, Too* were stacked by her bed to form a desk for her computer. It’s screen-saver had flying saucers “abducting” things off of the computer desktop.

But the first thing I noticed was the smell. It smelled kind of like a zoo. I sniffed. She must have noticed me.

“Oh, that’s from my Menagerie,” she told me.

“You’re what?” I asked.

“My Menagerie—my Zoo,” she said, and pointed to a curtain that hung behind her desk. I pulled it back.

Behind it was probably two dozen wooden reptile cages, some stacked on top of each other. Each one was home to weird-looking lizards and snakes, most of them basking on rocks underneath fluorescent lights that were fixed inside each cage. Actually they were more like aquariums, with plastic windows in front and on top. I was really impressed. I walked up to one of the lizard cages for a closer look. Off to my side, something moved. I turned.

A gigantic snake was coiled in the corner of the room. No cage. It was almost as big around as I was, and if it stretched out I’m sure it would run the length of the entire basement. It’s enormous head jumped up at my movement, and it flicked its tongue out at me hungrily. I jumped back and nearly knocked myself unconscious against the wall.
“Fluffy, no,” Carrie Homer said, shaking her finger at the giant snake. The snake, Fluffy, reared its head back at the sound of her voice, and I swear it looked ashamed as it coiled back up.

“Fluffy?” I asked, hoping I didn’t sound as petrified as I was.

“Yep,” Carrie said, stroking Fluffy’s scales like it was a cat, “I’ve had him since I was five years old. He was tiny then. Wanna pet him?”

“Uh—“

Carrie smiled at me. “He was just teasing you, he always does that to new people. He’s really a big softie. Come on, pet him.”

I swallowed, and slowly approached Fluffy. His head was resting on Carrie’s lap now, and I had to admit, he did look perfectly calm. He really was a neat-looking snake, with leopard markings in black and gold all over. I reached out and began petting him. I don’t know how I could tell, but he seemed to like it.

“What kind of snake is he?” I asked.

“He’s a Burmese Python. Here,” she said, and promptly picked up Fluffy’s head and put it on my lap. “Watch him while I go change.”

Now, I felt kind of strange being in the same room with a girl while she was changing. Of course, Carrie changed on the other side of the curtain, but it was pretty close—I could hear her. Add to that this giant snake nuzzling against me. But after the last couple days, I was getting used to weirdness. So I sat on the floor, petting a 20-foot snake as if it was a lap cat. Fluffy
appreciatively rubbed his nose against my knee. Behind the curtain, Carrie kept talking.

“Yeah, he outgrew my biggest cage a couple years ago, so I’ve just had him loose since then. He doesn’t move around much, except when I feed him,” she said.

“What do you feed him?” I asked.

“Usually two or three guinea pigs every week or so,” she said. That sounded okay to me. I wasn’t much for furry creatures anyway. I know it sounds mean, but I never thought guinea pigs had much purpose—I always thought they were runners-up to rabbits. If I were a guinea pig, I’d be very jealous of rabbits. I continued petting, glad that guinea-pig-smell was a lot different than thirteen-year-old-boy-smell.

“So what does your dad do?” I asked as Fluffy investigated my shoes.

“He’s a pirate,” Carrie called back.

“A what?”

“A pirate—he like, works for a company that takes over other companies. He explained it all to me once, and what it really came down to was that he’s a pirate.”

That sounded almost like it made sense.

“What about your mom?” I asked. Carrie came back from behind the curtain. She didn’t exactly look clean, but she wasn’t wearing muddy clothes anymore.

“She’s dead,” Carrie said.
My stomach tightened.

"I'm, uh, sorry—" I stammered.

"Nosy," she said, sticking her tongue out at me and picking up Fluffy.

"So are we going to that Aquarium or not?"

I looked at my watch. 11:40. Aunt Viv would be by my house in less than twenty minutes.

"Let's go," I said.
CHAPTER 19: TELLING THE STORY

It turned out that if you took a few side-streets, my house was really pretty close to Carrie’s. So we didn’t have to rush to get there or anything. We talked—Carrie said she thought it would be a great idea for me to draw a portrait of Fluffy—but eventually we sort of ran out of things to say. I decided that it was about time I told Carrie about Sid, the sink, Atlantis City, the Man in the Black Hat. Everything. I’d never felt so nervous about telling someone something in my life.

When I finished, Carrie didn’t say anything for a little bit. She seemed deep in thought.

“So, do you believe me?” I asked, my heart really pounding now. Carrie looked surprised.

“Sure I believe you, dorkwad,” she said, “I was just trying to think of what you could do to get rid of that dragon. You’re sure you can’t draw it anymore?” I sighed.

“Yeah,” I said, “It’s like all I can draw is a big shadow, no details. That’s why I’m going to the Aquarium, I figure maybe if I practice drawing other things I’ll be able to draw the dragon again.”

Just then a big black Cadillac screeched around the corner at about 50 miles an hour. Carrie gasped, and grabbed my arm.

“Relax, that’s my Aunt Viv,” I said. Carrie smiled, and I think blushed a little, letting go of my arm. Aunt Viv’s car screamed to a stop beside us. The driver’s side door opened, looking as usual through the tinted glass as if
nobody was getting out, Aunt Viv being so short and all. The door slammed and Aunt Viv walked into view over the hood of the car. If Aunt Viv owned a truck or something, we probably still wouldn’t have been able to see her.

“Who’s that?” Aunt Viv said, pointing at Carrie.

“This is, uh, my friend Carrie Homer,” I said as Aunt Viv walked around her car and shook Carrie’s hand.

“Glad to know ya,” Aunt Viv said, then looked at me “She comin’ along?”

“If that’s okay,” Carrie said. Unlike most people, she didn’t seem to be that freaked out by Aunt Viv. Most people are scared to death of her.

“Sure, why not?” Aunt Viv said, “Hop in.”

We hopped in. I took the back seat. The entire way to the Aquarium, Aunt Viv and Carrie talked. First about normal things, until Carrie dropped the bombshell.

“So, what do you think about Jonah and the sink-world?” she said, and I groaned.

“Huh?” Aunt Viv said, eyeing me in the rear-view mirror. So then Carrie Homer told Aunt Viv everything about me, the sink, Sid, you name it.

“So, what do you think?” Carrie asked Aunt Viv, “Because we can’t figure it out.” Aunt Viv drove silently for a few seconds. I thought she was either going to answer, or drive us straight to the Drug Rehab center.

“I think you’ll figure it all out eventually,” Aunt Viv said, pulling into the Aquarium’s parking lot.
“So you believe us?” I asked from the back seat. Aunt Viv turned around to look at me, somehow managing to drive and not kill someone at the same time.

“Of course I believe you, dummy,” she said, “A lot stranger things happened to me when I was a teenager.” I tried, but I absolutely couldn’t imagine Aunt Viv as a teenager. She pulled to a stop in front of the Aquarium.

“Well, thanks for the ride, Aunt Viv,” I said, getting out, “You don’t want to come in?” Aunt Viv shook her head.

“Naw, I’ve got an appointment at the Power Plant at 12:30,” she said, “I’ll pick you guys up in a few hours. Have a good time, that’s an order.” We waved goodbye as Aunt Viv screeched out of the parking lot, narrowly missing three innocent bystanders.

“I can’t believe you told her,” I told Carrie, laughing, as we walked to the main entrance.

“Hey, I told you all about my alien stuff in school, remember?” Carrie said, punching me lightly on the arm.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, “Just don’t ever tell my mom, she’s, uh, not like Aunt Viv about those things.” Carrie shrugged.

“Your Aunt’s pretty cool,” she said, “She’s one of Them, you know.”

“What?” I asked.

“She’s an alien,” Carrie said as we reached the ticket window, “Don’t worry, they’re not all the evil, abducting kind. Your Aunt’s one of the cool ones.”
As crazy as it sounded, it sure would explain a lot about Aunt Viv. As I took out my membership card I realized that Carrie might not have enough money to pay the non-membership entrance fee. Then I noticed that my card read *Family* Membership. The picture of Sid the Shark winked at me.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I told the guy in the ticket booth that Carrie was my sister, showing him my card. He waved us in.

“Nice move,” Carrie told me once we were inside, “I didn’t know it costs ten bucks to get in.”

“It’s worth it,” I said as we walked into the main exhibit area.
CHAPTER 20: A CONFIRMED SIGHTING

The Aquarium was just as wonderful as I remembered it, and I was happy to see Carrie's face light up, too, when she saw all the exhibits. She caught me looking at her, and I turned away, embarrassed.

"So where's the sea-snakes?" she asked. I pointed.

"Up the ramp a ways," I said, but she had already taken off up the ramp. I chased after her, thinking that with all the running and swimming I'd been doing lately, I was going to be in good shape pretty soon. I found Carrie at the Moray Eel tank, making faces at the smiling eels.

"Okay, so let's see what you can do," she said, pointing to the small notebook in my coat pocket. I smiled, flipping it to a blank page, and began to draw.

The afternoon went by very quickly. Carrie would run around and point to something she wanted me to draw, and I'd sketch it out as fast as I could, then show it to her. Sometimes she had suggestions—she said my anemones looked too much like mashed potatoes—but mostly she liked my sketches. Best of all, she didn't complain that they weren't "spiritual" like Miss Barth and my mom.

Later, we were both sitting in front of the octopus tank as I sketched out the dopey octopus we decided to name Elmer. It had been a long afternoon—my notebook was almost full of sketches, and my drawing-hand was beginning to ache. It was almost 4PM, and the crowd was beginning to thin out. We pretty much had the Aquarium to ourselves.
“So, do you draw people?” Carrie asked suddenly. I shook my head.

“Not really, they’re usually pretty boring,” I said, adding suction cups to Elmer’s tentacles.

“Oh,” Carrie said, “Well, you should.” I chuckled nervously. I didn’t know what she was getting at.

“Why?”

“Because then you could draw me, and then I could see Atlantis City,” she said, “Didn’t you say that everything you draw ends up there?” I thought about it.

“I guess,” I said, “But I’ve never tried people. Besides, Sid said it was my membership card that brought me there.”

“No,” Carrie said, “It was something else.” Just then I noticed that she was touching my hand. I looked up at her, and all of a sudden I realized that she was blushing, and she was going to kiss me, and I was all right with that. We leaned closer to each other.

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone standing right behind us. My heart skipped—it was the Man in the Black Hat again, towering above us. I whirled around to face him.

Just like last time, he was gone. Next to me, Carrie was looking at the space where the Man in the Black Hat had just been with the same expression as me.

“Did you just see—“ she started.
"That was him! The Man in the Black Hat I told you about!" I exclaimed. We looked around. Nobody was in sight. For now, at least, whatever we had been about to do was forgotten.

"Didn't you say you saw him in front of the octopus tank last time, too?" Carrie asked.

"Yeah, it was right here," I said, "But what's that supposed to mean? He's an octopus-man?" I looked down at my sketch of Elmer, then at the real Elmer, who was flushed, changing colors like crazy at the front of the tank.

"Elmer must have seen him, too," Carrie said, "That makes three of us that saw him at the same time. In my UFO books, that's what's called a 'confirmed sighting.'"

"I knew I wasn't crazy," I said to myself.

"Never said you were," Carrie replied, sticking her tongue out at me and skipping ahead down the ramp. I decided I was done drawing for the afternoon. Aunt Viv would be picking us up pretty soon. We headed down the spiral walkway, chuckling at Mrs. Jones the Sand Tiger shark as she circled past us in her tank.
CHAPTER 21: EAT N' DRIVE

Aunt Viv picked us up a little while later and took us home. On the way, she even took us to the Eat n’ Drive, her favorite burger joint. Basically it was like MacDonalds, only you didn’t have to get out of your car. You just parked there and these waiters came out and took your order. Then they brought you your burgers. In the summer they gave you these trays you could attach to the car doors, but in the winter people pretty much got their burgers and drove away. That’s what we did. Aunt Viv always needs to be moving. She gets edgy when she’s in one place for very long. While munching on our burgers (Eat n’ Drive burgers are more harmful to your health than any other, and therefore they taste fantastic) I invited Carrie to come see my porthole drawings when we got to my house, and she agreed. Actually she said that she’d love to see my artwork, and I thought it was nice that she called it that.

The whole way home, though, Carrie and Aunt Viv talked as if they were old friends. Carrie even asked Aunt Viv if she was an alien. Aunt Viv just laughed and said that she came from the planet Zoltan, but was for the most part friendly as long as you didn’t get in her way. I wasn’t sure if she was serious or not, but we all laughed anyway. You’d never think that they had only just met a few hours ago. Of course, I myself was wondering if the almost-kiss in the Aquarium was all in my mind or not, and if it wasn’t, what did that mean? Was Carrie Homer my girlfriend? As I listened to Carrie and Aunt Viv talk and laugh (Carrie had a really great laugh, it sounded real, not
squeaky like most girls I knew), I decided that I wouldn't mind being Carrie Homer’s boyfriend one bit.

Aunt Viv let us off at my house in her usual tire-screeching way, telling Carrie to watch out for the aliens from the Wombat Nebula. “They’re real bad seeds,” she said, then hit the gas and tore off down the street.

“She’s really neat,” Carrie told me as we watched Aunt Viv’s car race off. “Yeah,” I said, and I reached out and took her hand in mine. It seemed like the thing to do, and even though I felt awkward as hell, it felt good. Carrie smiled.

Just then another car pulled into my driveway. It was the Reverend Halford’s Aerostar, and my mom was inside. I let go of Carrie’s hand.

“Hi mom,” I said as she got out. She nodded to me, still talking about something with the Reverend, and I noticed her look at Carrie suspiciously. I interrupted her.

“Mom, this is my friend Carrie, is it all right if I show her my pictures and stuff?” I said. For some reason, my mom and Reverend Halford (who looked more red in the face than usual today), gave each other a weird look when I said that.

“No, honey, it’s getting dark, and your little friend will need to go home soon anyway,” my mom said.

“But mom, it’s only—” I began.
"Jonah," Reverend Halford said, "You two should have known better than to be out this late anyway, what with the kidnappings and all. I can give your friend a ride if you like—she shouldn’t be walking home alone."

"That’s okay, I live right down the street," Carrie said, even though technically she was a little more than right up the street. Apparently Carrie, who had been silent up till now, had some kind of allergic reaction to either Reverend Halford or Aerostar vans. Either way, I could see her point.

Reverend Halford shrugged and said something biblical to my mom, who have him an amen right back, and headed for the house, still looking at me and Carrie suspiciously. I had an idea what was in store for me later on. I shook my head as Reverend Halford pulled out of the driveway, tooting his horn as he left.

"Sorry about that," I said, "My mom’s kind of—lame." Carrie laughed.

"That’s okay, I’ll come over and see your pictures some other time," she said, "I’d probably better get going anyway, I have to feed Fluffy." We were both sort of shifting from foot to foot and staring at the sidewalk.

"Want my Exacto knife for protection?" I asked. Carrie smiled, shaking her head. Then she kissed me. Really fast. On the cheek. It was over before I knew what happened. I looked at her, and was about to say something (probably something dumb), when she stuck her tongue out at me.

"See ya," she said, and skipped down the street. I practically glided back to my house. You might think this is kind of pathetic, but I had never been kissed before. Well, not by anyone that isn’t a relative. Like I said, most
girls at school thought I was pretty freaky. But Carrie Homer was different. I didn’t know if this meant she was my girlfriend or not, but that didn’t matter. The only thing was I really hoped my mom hadn’t been watching us through the window. I was in no mood for the Sex Talk tonight.
CHAPTER 22: PIECE BY PIECE

I pretty much knew that if my mom had seen Carrie kiss me, and if she was planning on giving me the Sex Talk because of it, she would have to work herself into it. She’d start by awkwardly talking to me about other things. I’ve caught her doing this several times already, and what I do to keep it from going any further is a) leave the room (if possible), b) change the subject to something she couldn’t possibly link back to the Sex Talk (like the Nazi concentration camps Mr. Gatt once told us “got a bad rap”), or c) feign illness or (if necessary), death. When I entered the house after Carrie left, I heard my mom puttering in the kitchen.

“Mom, I have a lot of homework to do, so I’ll be in my room, uh, studying,” I said, taking advantage of the situation, and I was in my room before I could hear her reply.

I did have work to do, but it had nothing to do with school.

I took out my pocket sketchbook from this afternoon and placed it on the bed next to me. Then I opened up my big art notebook to a blank page. The way my pencil had been whizzing this afternoon, I thought I’d have no problem drawing the dragon now. To be safe, I began with the cage I wanted to put it in. I decided it should be made from the hull of a sunken submarine, with a few large portholes so that Sid (or one of his goons) could check and make sure the dragon didn’t try anything funny. I figured once I got the dragon caught up in this prison ship, Sid and his goons could bury it or shove it off a deep-sea canyon or something.
But once again, when I got to the part where I needed to draw the dragon, I got stuck. Nothing came to me. Frustrated, I looked over my sketches from that afternoon.

It was as if neon lights were jumping off the pages at me.

Just about everything I had drawn that afternoon had something, some part, that belonged to the dragon. I was sure of it. The first picture I turned to was the octopus—Elmer. In general, Elmer was pretty non-threatening. But the way I had drawn his tentacles that afternoon was different. It was as if instead of drawing Elmer’s tentacles, I had drawn the wicked antennae that sprouted from all over the dragon’s head. It seemed that every sketch of mine had a different piece of the dragon I had seen. Elmer’s tentacles, the devil-ray’s wings, the lion fish’s stinger-spikes, even the pincers of the lobsters were all somehow a part of the dragon. I was sure of it.

Excited, I used my Exacto knife to cut away all the dragon-parts from my sketches. Amazingly, I had even drawn them all the right size, so that when I put the pieces together, it really did look like the dragon. Somehow I had known to draw some things bigger and some things smaller that afternoon. As I cut out and formed a rough diagram of the dragon, a knock at my door startled me.

I looked up. My clock radio read 8:15. I had been home for three hours. It seemed like ten minutes, but when I saw the detailed drawing of the submarine-prison and all the cutouts of dragon-parts, three hours sounded reasonable.
"Jonah, open up," my mom called from the other side of my door, banging again. Sighing, I got up, hoping she just wanted to yell at me for not eating whatever disgusting health-food dinner she had made. Just in case she was going to try and do the Sex Talk, I got my oh-my-god-I'm-gonna-barf face ready before opening the door.

Mom was on the phone with someone, and she looked pretty upset. The first thing I thought was that someone in her Flute Group had died.

"Jonah, did your little friend say she was going somewhere else tonight when she left?" my mom asked me, giving me a really stern you-better-tell-me-the-truth look. At first I was confused. What did this have to do with one of my mom's weird friends?

"No, I think she said something about feeding Fluffy," I said. As soon as I said it I knew what was going on. All of a sudden I felt like I was going to be sick for real.

"He says she had to feed your cat," my mom said into the phone. She paused. "What kind of a name is that for a snake?" she said. I grabbed her arm.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked.

"Your little friend didn't come home tonight," she told me, "Her father thought you might know where she is because she told him about you yesterday."

My mom continued talking to Carrie’s father on the phone for a while outside my door, but I couldn’t hear. I guess you could say I was in shock. I
looked at the pieces of the dragon on the bed behind me. The only thing missing was a face. Somehow, I knew all the weird things going on had something to do with Carrie’s disappearance. I didn’t know how, but I knew anyway. I had seen the mysterious man in the black hat twice in two days, and today he was watching me and Carrie at the Aquarium. I didn’t know what he had to do with the dragon, or Sid, or anything else, but I knew he was involved. I thought about Carrie skipping home, and how it already had been getting dark, and how she probably would have taken a short-cut through the swamp she tackled me in this afternoon. All of a sudden I didn’t have a care in the world about my mom’s Sex Talk, and thinking about Carrie and the Man in the Black Hat made me feel sicker than I’ve ever felt in my life.

“Jonah,” my mom said from the doorway, “You’re turning green!”

I ran for the bathroom and threw up. I didn’t hear any voices. Not then, anyway.
I heard the voice again later, after I had gone to bed. Well, actually, it was after I had gone to bed and tried to draw people instead of fish. Carrie had said I should try that, and I was absolutely stuck with the dragon picture. I tried at least a dozen sets of jaws and eyes on it, and none of them worked. Anyway, I drew really bad pictures of some people from school—Mr. Gatt, Rob, Mrs. Jones. But they all looked like really bad cartoons. I was going to draw one of Carrie, but I didn’t want to make her look bad.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but I must have been tired, because when I woke up my flashlight was dimming next to me and I had drooled all over some of my cutouts. The words “straight and narrow” from one of my mom’s Bible magazines were where the dragon’s face would have been, if I had one. I use magazines sometimes as easels when I want to draw in bed after my bedtime. For some reason, those words rang a bell somewhere in my head.

I sat up groggily and checked the time. 5:15AM. I yawned, and gathered up my drawings from the bed around me. Even though I had drooled on some of it, the layout of the dragon was still kind of intact. *Straight and narrow, straight and narrow*... I picked up the magazine with the dragon parts on it and threw it on the floor, slamming my head back against my pillow. I thought about Carrie, where she was. Before going to bed I had made my mom call Carrie’s dad back to see if she’d come home. My mom said a policeman had answered the phone, and told her Mr. Homer
couldn't be reached. Then she told me to pray for Carrie. I didn't know if it
would do any good, but I did, anyway.

"Jonah!"

I snapped back up in bed. I had been dozing when the voice came. It
was coming from the bathroom.

"Come here!" it said. I got out of bed. I was shaking. I couldn't be sure
because of the gurgling, but the voice sounded like it was Sid. Slowly, I
walked toward the door.

That's when I noticed the way my pictures had scattered on the floor.

When I threw them down, the dragon cutouts got mixed up with the
people-pictures I had tried. A few of them had fallen together. Even though
the light was dim, the bell in my head that had started ringing earlier sounded
like a cathedral on Christmas Day.

There was a face underneath the dragon's antennae now. It was one of
my cartoon people. Mrs. Jones.

I had made her toothy smile very exaggerated in my picture of her,
kind of as a joke. But I had also made her eyes big and evil-looking. I fell
back against my bed, staring. Slap a few scales on her face, and there, on my
floor, was the face of the dragon.

"Jonah, hurry!" the voice said. It sure sounded like Sid. Next door, my
mom mumbled something in her sleep.

I grabbed my Exacto knife from my bedside table, and tucked it, its
blade locked inside the plastic handle, in my pajama top. Then I got my
Aquarium membership from my wallet (in case I got sucked down the drain again) walked to the bathroom.

It smelled of Lysol (my mom fumigated after I threw up). Other than that, things looked normal. I didn’t want my mom to get woken up, so I closed the door behind me.

“We need to talk, Jonah,” the voice said, “You have to—“

I couldn’t make out the rest of what the voice said because a rush of gurgles drowned it out. I leaned closer to the sink.

“What?” I asked, “I have to what?” The drain belched.

“Gotcha,” the voice said, and the drain leapt up and swallowed me.
CHAPTER 24: THE DRAGON AND MRS. JONES

It had me. The dragon had me. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was its face, glaring at me. It was Mrs. Jones.

I was clenched in what felt like a vise, but looking down I saw that it was one of the dragon’s, or Mrs. Jones’, lobster-like pincers. Just like lobsters, it had blunt teeth on the inside, and they were pressing hard against my chest. It really hurt, but I knew she wasn’t even using half her strength. Yet.

“You should have finished the picture, Jonah,” the Mrs. Jones-Dragon said, grinning from gill to gill. She tightened her grip, cackling as I cried out.

I tried to look around me. We seemed to be hovering directly over the Stadium, but something was different. All the coral was blackened, burned, and around the Stadium, most of the buildings and caves looked like they had been bombed. As I looked, I realized that my right arm was a little bit loose. I tried to jiggle it free.

“Of course they’re all bombed and burned!” the Mrs. Jones-Dragon said, “That’s because I tore them down! I’m taking over down here.” She brought me closer to her face, her sharky jaws gnashing together. If we hadn’t been underwater, I’d swear she was salivating. My right arm was almost free. I had to distract her.

“Where’s Carrie?” I shouted at her, even though it hurt to breathe. The Mrs. Jones-Dragon laughed.
“Oh, yes, your little big-mouth friend,” she said, and even underwater her breath smelled like spoiled meat. “She’s right—in—here!” The Mrs. Jones-Dragon opened her gigantic jaws to swallow me.

At the same moment, my right arm popped free from her pincer. I reached into my pajama pocket for the Exacto knife, and with one movement popped out the blade and slashed at the first thing I saw: the Mrs. Jones-Dragon’s toothy gums.

She roared in pain, and the blast of horrible smells was beyond anything I’ve ever experienced, even in the school cafeteria. She lowered the pincer that was holding me, and I looked up to see a cloud of what looked like blood coming out of her jaws. Before she could decide to crush me in her pincer, I jabbed my Exacto blade into its scaly flesh. The exoskeleton was hard to get through, but once it cracked, grayish meat from inside was flying everywhere. It reminded me of eating at Red Lobster.

The Mrs. Jones-Dragon roared again, and before I could inflict any more damage on her pincer, she let me go.

I’ve never swum so fast in my life. I didn’t even know what I was heading for, I just swam. I could still hear the Mrs. Jones-Dragon behind me, bellowing madly, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before she came after me.

I got to the sandy bottom and looked for some rocks to hide under. I looked behind me, and saw that the dragon, trailing a cloud of blood from her mouth and lobster-meat from her pincer, was following me. Murder was in her eyes. There’d be no stalling this time.
I swam over to a small grouping of rocks, hoping I'd be able to fit underneath them. Just before I got there, however, another claw, from underneath the sand, sprang up, grabbed me, and pulled me under.
CHAPTER 25: THE WAR ROOM

"Whew!" someone said, "That was a close one, kid."

I opened my eyes, spitting sand and pebbles out of my mouth. I was in some kind of cave. A few scared-looking clusters of Tinafore anemones gave the cave some light, but most of what I could see was shadows. A big one in front of me moved out into the light. It was Louie, Sid's head goon.

"Yer safe now, kid," he said, "Everyone's in here now."

I looked around. Sure enough, all of the hundreds of fish that had been swimming about above this cave the day before were in here. They looked scared. It was pretty crowded, so most of the fish were just sort of hovering together.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Well, the blind cave fish decided a while ago they needed more room," Louie told me, as if this were a very unreasonable thing for the blind cave fish to do, "So they kind of branched out. We had to, you know, help, of course."

He shook his tiny lobster-head.

"Where's Sid?" I asked. Louie waved a claw at me and scurried off towards the other side of the cave.

"He's in the War Room—this way," he said, and, not knowing what else to do, I followed him, rubbing my chest. That dragon-pincer had really hurt.

As I swam through the cave, I saw just how many fish there were jammed in here. I pretty much had to swim through them. I apologized, of course, but the fish didn't seem to hear me. They just moved out of the way...
and kept on looking really worried. Above the cave, I could hear the Mrs. Jones-Dragon roaring and throwing rocks around. I shivered.

"In here," Louie said, jumping through a hole in the cave wall. It was just barely big enough for me to swim through. Good thing I'm skinny, I thought.

The War Room looked exactly like the cave we had just come from, except that instead of being jam-packed with fish, the only ones here were Sid and a few of his other Lobster-goons. They were all gathered in the middle of the room, with Sid circling around them. Like everyone else, Sid looked real worried.

"Hi, Sid," I said. Sid looked up at me.

"You didn't finish the picture, did you," he said.

"No, I didn't," I replied, annoyed. I had almost gotten eaten by the dragon! "But I think I can now—I know what face to put in it."

"It's too late," Sid said, "It's destroyed everything." The lobsters around him nodded in agreement, although I think they would have nodded to anything Sid said.

"What are you talking about? We've got to fight it! Look," I took out my Exacto knife and showed the blade to Sid. The lobsters all oooh-ed at it. "I cut it, and it bled, and I think I might have really messed up one of its pincers." The lobsters, even Louie, all cried out at that, and hid their claws from me.
"But listen to it, Jonah!" Sid said, looking up at the room's rocky ceiling. Actually, it didn't sound like the dragon was doing much of anything right now. "There's no way we can go up against something like that."

I couldn't believe it. I was surrounded by wimps! If Aunt Viv had been here she would have whipped them into shape in a couple seconds.

"What about you Sid?" I shouted, "You're a shark! You're not supposed to be afraid of anything!" Behind me, I could see that, through the hole in the cave wall, the fish in the other room were watching us.

"I'm a cartoon shark!" Sid exclaimed, "There's a difference!"

I guess he had a point. He never did look as menacing as the real sharks I had seen at the Aquarium.

"What kind of a War Room is this?" I yelled, "All you're doing is sitting around pretending to be doing something when you're really just twiddling your thumbs!" I looked around at Sid and the lobster-goons. "I mean, twiddling your, um, fins and claws."

The room suddenly got brighter. A couple Glow-light tetras had come in from the other room.

"Hey!" Sid yelled, "You're not allowed in the War Room!" I snickered.

"You might as well call it the Wimp Room," I told them, "I'm going back out there to fight the dragon, if you want to stay here, that's fine with me."
Before Sid or Louie could do anything, I turned and swam out of the War Room. I was met by a small group of tetras—two Neons, a Glow-light, and a Head-and-Tail-light fish. It was the Glow-light who spoke.

"We'll help you, Jonah," he said. He had kind of a squeaky voice, and I really didn't see what a bunch of little tetras could do to help take down the Mrs. Jones-Dragon, but I needed all the help I could get.

"Okay," I said, "Let's go kick some dragon ass!"

The tetra leaders called their troops, and I was impressed at how many of them there were. Three or four hundred at least. The light in the room got brighter as they prepared for battle. With my battalion of glowing tetras behind me, I followed a blind cave fish through the maze of tunnels and caves. When we got to the entrance, everything was dark. I couldn't even make out the shape of the Stadium in the distance. I looked at the glowing army behind me. They might be a help, after all.
“Why is it so dark?” I asked the Tetra leader, who was hovering next to me, I guess waiting for me to give orders.

“It’s been like that since the dragon started attacking us,” he said. “It’s not safe for us to be anywhere other than the caves, especially us and the anemones. And it’s us that make most of the light.”

That made sense.

“What’s your name?” I asked. The Tetra looked surprised, and his orangish glow got a little brighter.

“Ted,” he said, “Sid, uh, doesn’t really care what our names are. Just as long as we keep things bright.”

“Well, Ted, once we take care of this ugly-ass dragon, we’re going to make some major changes around here,” I assured him, still steamed at Sid and Louie’s wimpiness. Ted smiled, and brightened some more.

“So, how bright can you make yourselves?” I asked, scanning the rocky area surrounding us. No dragon so far.

“We’re only at about half-power right now,” Ted said proudly, then whispered, “Even Sid doesn’t know how bright we can be—with what he pays us, why should he, right?”

“Well, I’m going to go on out there and see if I can find that dragon,” I said, “I think if you guys all bunch up really tight you’ll be pretty safe, plus you might fool the dragon into thinking you’re one giant fish. You might scare her.” Ted looked pretty pleased with the prospect of scaring the dragon.
"We can do that," he said. I popped open the blade on my Exacto knife.

"All right, let's go!" I said, and swam out into the darkness.

The army of glowing Tetras behind me gave me plenty of light to see. At first I almost didn't want to. Everything was destroyed. It was awful. All the coral sea-scrapers, the caves, even the sunken ships were either in pieces or burned to a crisp. Finally we reached the city-limits, coming to a drop-off into a much deeper area, where I couldn't even see the bottom.

I turned around to check on the Tetras, and they almost scared me. They were bunched so close together they really did look like one giant creature. Ted had shaped them into a big glowing snake. It looked pretty menacing.

I heard a rumble below me. I couldn't see much because of the darkness. Even the Tetra-snake's glow didn't reach that far down.

"What was that?" Ted called from his position in the Tetra-snake's head.

I tightened my grip on the Exacto knife and searched the darkness for movement. For a second I still didn't see anything, then a wall of bubbles came rushing up at us.

"Look out, here it comes!" I yelled. The Tetra-snake leapt forward, coiling as if about to strike whatever was rising from below us.

Then the Mrs. Jones-Dragon struck. From above.

I don't know how she was able to hide up there without our seeing her, but there she was, and before the Tetra-snake could turn around, she pounced
down at me, wings spread, and grabbed me in one of her tentacles. She shook me so hard I dropped my Exacto knife.

“Rule number one,” she hissed, “Never, ever, get me up-set.” She brought me up to her jaws for the second time, and I saw the slash I had made in her gums. Two new hooked teeth were growing from it. I closed my eyes and held my breath.

Instead of swallowing me, the Mrs. Jones-dragon let out another bellow of pain, louder than when I had cut her. I opened my eyes. She still held me in one of her tentacles, but I was no longer being stuffed into her jaws. She was twisting around, trying to get at her tail, almost like a dog.

“Feeding frenzy!” Sid yelled. I turned around as much as I could in the tentacle, and saw that Sid and a school of hammerhead sharks were busy chomping on the Mrs. Jones-Dragon’s tail. She whipped it back and forth, scattering sharks all over the place, but they kept coming back. I struggled to free myself, but it was no use—her grip was tighter than ever.

Just then, a swirl of light came from beneath us. It was the Tetra-snake. It coiled around the Mrs. Jones-Dragon just like an Anaconda, and looked like it was actually biting at her back. I don’t know if it actually hurt her, since the snake was only a big bunch of glowing Tetras, but it sure seemed to annoy her. She roared again, belching out gobs of hot lava.

The light from the lava and the Tetra snake only made things worse for the Mrs. Jones-Dragon. Now that everyone could see that she was in trouble, the rest of my underwater population came to help. A full squadron of manta-
rays dropped rocks on the dragon’s head. The moray eel family attacked her gills, burrowing their way inside. Even the shy lionfish joined the attack, stinging the Mrs. Jones-dragon with their deadly back-spikes.

Things were looking pretty good until the Mrs. Jones-Dragon turned her attention back on me.

"It’s not over yet, skinny-boy," she said, and in one swift motion whisked me up into her jaws and swallowed me.
CHAPTER 27: INTO THE FOG

Instead of winding up in the Mrs. Jones-Dragon’s gullet, I fell down, hard, onto wet pavement. I scraped my arms and legs up pretty bad, but all in all it was a great alternative to getting digested by a dragon.

I looked around. I was in the street right outside my house. It was still dark out, and a thick layer of fog hung over everything. I scrambled to my feet and checked the time. It was 5:55AM. I had to find Mrs. Jones.

My mom wouldn’t be getting up for a few minutes, and I was pretty sure that if I woke her up and told her that I had been in an underwater world under our bathroom sink and had found out that Mrs. Jones was responsible for all the kidnappings lately, my mom would have me locked in the Drug Rehab center before the sun rose. Even if I told her I just had a feeling that it was Mrs. Jones, she probably wouldn’t believe me. And if she didn’t, neither would Officer Patton. I had to catch her red-handed.

In front of me, I heard footsteps. They smacked wet against the pavement. I backed away, wishing I hadn’t dropped my Exacto knife. The footsteps got closer, and then, about 20 feet from me, a figure stepped out of the fog.

It was the Man in the Black Hat. Once again, I couldn’t see his face in all the shadows. He stopped walking. So did I.

We stood there, not moving, for a really long time. I was ready to start running any second. Then, very slowly, the man raised his right hand, and waved for me to come closer. He was still a little ways away, so I took a couple
slow steps toward him. The man turned, and walked back into the fog, waving for me to follow him.

I hesitated. Until I had seen the Mrs. Jones-Dragon, I had been pretty sure that this guy was the kidnapper. Now, this guy was nowhere near as big as Mrs. Jones, so he was either one of her henchmen, or he was a good guy. I decided to bet that he was a good guy, at least for now. At this point, I had nothing to lose. I followed him into the fog.

I followed his footsteps for about ten minutes, barely able to see his dark shape in front of me. That was fine by me—I still didn’t want to get too close to him. The fog got so thick that after a while I couldn’t even make out the houses on either side of me. We turned down a few side-streets, then the man led me onto a grassy area that looked kind of familiar to me. I kept following his shadow toward a bright light up ahead. The grass turned into a set of stone steps I knew very well. I looked up. The fog cleared just enough for me to see the words on the building’s entryway.

They read, *Gungywamp Elementary School.*
CHAPTER 28: SHE'S A WITCH

The Man in the Black Hat was gone. He could have been lurking in the fog somewhere nearby, but I didn’t see him.

I walked up to the front door of the school and tried it. Locked, of course, but it was worth a shot. I turned back around, wondering if the man was going to guide me any further. I still couldn’t see him, so I walked back down the steps and headed for one of the other entrances.

They were all locked, as well. However, I noticed that a light was on through one of the basement windows. I couldn’t see through the grimy glass, but the light was unmistakable. All there was down there was the boiler, so I figured it could be one of the janitors at work early. But something told me that it wasn’t.

I looked around again. The fog was starting to lift a little, and the sky was beginning to brighten. The playground was empty. I took a deep breath, and before I could chicken out, I knelt down and tugged on the basement window.

As expected, it was locked as well. I tapped my pockets for something to pick the lock, and found my membership card. Remembering some cop show on TV, I slipped the card between the windowpanes and swiped it across the lock. Sure enough, the lock clicked open. My heart was racing now, and I tried not to think about how dumb I’d look if I was wrong about everything and got caught breaking into the school’s boiler room. I put the card back in my pocket and lifted the basement window.
It wasn’t the boiler-room. It must have been some forgotten storage closet or something. But I don’t think this was the kind of storage the school had in mind.

There were four metal cages in the room, and inside three of them were huddled Rob Plunk, Liz Bath, and Carrie Homer. The only light in the room was a bulb hanging from the ceiling. Carrie gasped as I opened the window all the way and, checking to make sure Mrs. Jones wasn’t around, slipped inside.

“Jonah! How did—“ Carrie whispered. Other than the fact that she was in a cage, she looked okay. Rob and Liz, however, looked like zombies.

“It’s a long story,” I whispered back, “It’s Mrs. Jones, right?” Carrie nodded.

“She’s still here—you have to hide or find a phone or something,” she said, pushing me away from her cage.

“But what’s she doing, where are the keys to the cages?” I asked.

“She has them,” Carrie said, watching the door.

“Well, what’s she doing, is it some kind of alien thing?” Carrie shook her head.

“No, I don’t think she’s an alien. She’s a witch.” In the other two cages, Rob and Liz started nodding, the first movement I’d seen from them since I got there. “She’s been making us do,” Carrie gulped, “grammar exercises.”

I gasped. No wonder Rob and Liz looked so dead. I noticed piles of worksheets on punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and worse. Rob started
banging his head against his cage, mindlessly conjugating the verb “to flagellate.”

“I’ll go find a phone,” I said, and, listening for footsteps, opened the storage room door.

The basement of Gungywamp elementary is pretty big. Most of it is taken up by the gigantic boiler system, which everyone agrees will sooner or later blow up, killing everyone within ten miles. Different sized pipes so rusted and old they couldn’t have been built in this century run every which way, and I had to duck and crawl at times to make my way across the basement to the stairway. I kept expecting Mrs. Jones to jump out at me from every shadow, but she was nowhere to be found.

I finally reached the stairs that led to the school’s main hallway. I tiptoed up, glad I wasn’t wearing any noisy shoes. The door to the hallway had a frosted glass window, so it was hard to tell if Mrs. Jones was out there somewhere. But the light outside was getting brighter, and it was easy to see that she wasn’t standing right outside, so I opened it. The hallway was empty. On the other end was Principal Blessing’s office. I’d be able to call the police from his phone if I could make it down there before Mrs. Jones got me. Carefully, quietly, I snuck down the hallway, checking each doorway I passed to make sure Mrs. Jones wasn’t inside. The faces of the Presidents glared down at me from the walls, not exactly making this any easier for me.

I finally got to Principal Blessing’s office. I tried the knob, hoping it wasn’t locked. It wasn’t. I opened the door and walked in.
"Hey there, skinny-boy," Mrs. Jones said, her toothy sneer a mile wide. I froze. Mrs. Jones drummed her fingers on top of Principal Blessing’s phone. "Looking for this?" she asked, then cackled. I backed into the hallway again, and she rose from Principal Blessing’s desk. She was even taller that I remembered. And wider.

"Where’re you going, skinny-boy?" she seethed, leering.

I took off down the hall.
CHAPTER 29: SKINNY-BOY STRIKES BACK

Mrs. Jones thundered down the hallway after me, huffing and puffing. I said before that she was built like one of those big pro-football linebackers. Well, she ran like one, too. Slow. So I made up some distance pretty fast. I didn’t want her to chase me back to the basement, so I turned left down the hallway that led to the gym. Behind me, Mrs. Jones cackled.

“I have you now, skinny-boy!” she yelled from around the corner. I could see already that she was right. The doors to the gymnasium were chained shut. I had nowhere to go. I ran up to the gym doors and shook them, hoping maybe the chains were loose enough for me to squeeze through a small opening in the door. No such luck. The chains were tight. I turned around.

Mrs. Jones stood at the other end of the hallway, her gigantic shadow stretching all the way down to where I stood. I saw that she had her rolling pin in her hand.

“You’re coming with me, skinny-boy,” she said, and began walking towards me.

Desperately, I looked around for an escape. The windows were too high, and besides, they were so big I’d never be able to lift them. I looked along the walls. GO SWAMP-THINGS!! a sign hanging below the fire alarm read.
I froze. The fire alarm! I looked around, knowing the alarm-handle had to be around here somewhere. It was on the opposite wall. Mrs. Jones, halfway down the hallway, saw what I was doing, bellowed, and began to run.

With both hands, just to make sure, I pulled the lever down. Purple ink squirted onto my hands (it's to catch pranksters), and, sounding like a roomful of cars honking at the same time, the alarm rang. Even the sprinklers went off, dousing me and Mrs. Jones, who was about twenty feet from me at this point.

I knew the fire department would be here pretty soon, but that didn't help the fact that I was still cornered by Mrs. Jones. And she had a rolling pin. And she was very pissed off. She bellowed again, angrily wiping sprinkler water from her eyes.

"God-dammit, you nosy brat!" she yelled and, bringing the rolling pin back like a baseball bat, prepared to charge. I had to do something.

"I ain't no nosy brat," I blurted out, not being able to think of anything else to do. Mrs. Jones stopped in her tracks and screamed.

"You're not a nosy brat!" she yelled, teeth clenched as if she was seriously in pain, "Not! Not! Not!" Encouraged, I tried again.

"Hey, I only, uh, are, um, try to, ah, helping," I stammered. Trying to come up with the worst possible grammar was pretty tough. It worked, though. Mrs. Jones screamed again, throwing her head back and slamming the rolling pin into the wall, breaking through it completely and making a big hole.
“SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT!!!” she screamed, “HASN’T ANYONE EVER TAUGHT YOU WHAT A SUBJECT AND A VERB ARE”

“Don’t you mean, what a subject and a verb is?” I asked as sweetly as possible. Mrs. Jones roared again and threw her rolling-pin up through one of the giant windows. Glass splinters fell everywhere. As Mrs. Jones screamed in rage, I made a run for it. I almost slipped on the wet floor. Mrs. Jones saw me and lunged, but she slipped all the way, and fell with a huge thunkk to the floor. As if I had suddenly turned into a sprinter, I was down to the other end of the hall in two seconds flat.

When I got there, I turned around to check on Mrs. Jones. She was still lying on the floor, and it looked like she was still screaming about subjects and verbs, pounding her fists against the ground. It was hard to hear over the noise of the fire alarms.

I ran down to Principal Blessing’s office again, and as fast as possible—in case Mrs. Jones got back up—dialed 911. Then, without saying anything, I set the receiver down on the desk. I knew from past prank-call experience that the police traced every 911 call. They’d know where to go. I dashed out of the office and through the front door.

It was morning. The fog had pretty much cleared, and the snow looked kind of pretty in the sunlight. As I walked down the steps, five fire engines came tearing around the corner, horns blaring. My ears were still ringing from the fire-alarms, so I didn't notice them until I saw them pull into the school's driveway. I guess the fire department figured the boiler had finally
blown up, because they looked ready. By the time I had run up to them, they already had their high-pressure hoses ready to go.

"There's no fire!" I yelled at one of the firemen, who I remembered seeing at a Stop, Drop, and Roll assembly. "But the kidnapper's inside! She just attacked me!"

"Huh?" the fireman said, looking the front of the school up and down, tapping the nozzle of his high-pressure hose.

Just then, the front doors burst open again. Mrs. Jones stormed out, totally ignoring the firemen, and charged down the stairs at me. She leapt out at me in a flying-tackle, it all happening so fast that all I could do was stand there as she flew towards me.

"SUBJECTIVE—"

The fireman I was standing next to opened his hose full-power against Mrs. Jones. It hit her head-on and blew her ten feet off to my side. She landed in a wet heap next to the flagpole. I had never seen anything cooler in my life.

"So where's the fire?" one of the other firemen asked, apparently not shocked in the least to see an old lady take a flying leap and then get blown away by a high-pressure hose.

Exhausted, I plopped down on the snowy ground, now slushy from the fire-hose, not caring that my pajamas were already soaked and I was freezing. My membership card fell out of my pocket, and as I heard the first police siren from down the street, Sid the Smiling Shark gave me a big wink.
EPILOGUE

“Oh my god! I’m drowning!”

“Don’t worry, you can breathe,” I said, “Just be sure to keep that with you.” I pointed at the membership card in Carrie’s hand. Cautiously, she took a breath, then giggled, letting out a stream of bubbles.

“This feels so weird!” she said. I smiled. This was her first trip.

“You’ll get used to it,” Sid said, grinning as he circled overhead. He was wearing a bow-tie made of seaweed. Ever since he was elected Mayor of Atlantis City, he’s been trying to boost his former-gangster image. I didn’t think the bow-tie exactly did that, but he’s been giving the anemones and the crustacean construction crews much better pay, and everyone liked him now, so I didn’t burst his bubble about it.

“Wanna go for a swim?” I asked Carrie. She batted her eyes at me and held out her arm. Grinning, I took it and we swam off over the newly-rebuilt Atlantis City.

“It doesn’t look like it ever was destroyed,” Carrie said as we glided over the new Stadium complex, now complete with a dragon-proof dome.

“Sid and his crews did a great job,” I admitted, then pointed to the prison-submarine that held the Mrs. Jones-Dragon. “Wanna say hi?”

Carrie thought about it.

“We could swim around outside and talk in horribly bad grammar,” she said. I grinned.

“Let’s go,” I said, “Race ya?” Carrie paused.
“So did you ever hear from the Man in the Black Hat again?” she asked.

“No,” I said, frowning, “But like I said, I’m pretty sure he’s a good guy. He might turn up again sometime.”

“Yeah,” Carrie said, “A good guy, but sneaky, kind of like me.”

“Huh?” I said. Carrie smiled.

“On-your-mark-get-set-GO!” she chattered, and, sticking her tongue out at me, zipped off toward the submarine.

The race ended up being a tie.