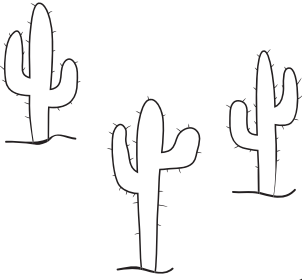


RACER



M.G. HIGGINS





Austin
Jackson

Age: 11 (getting taller every day)

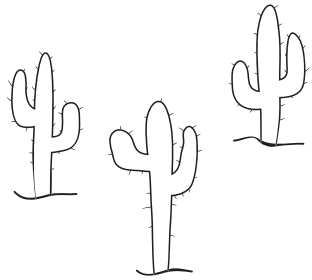
Best School Subject: science

Favorite Food: pancakes with grape jelly

Most Embarrassing Secret: sleeps with a teddy bear

Best Quality: honesty

CHARACTERS



Slice

Age: 12 (big for his age)

Favorite Movie: *Big*

Future Plans: create a BMX clothing line

Secret Wish: to have an older brother and a younger sister

Best Quality: endurance

1

NIGHTMARE

I'm going fast. Maybe too fast. I tap the brake. Lean into the corner. My foot scrapes the dirt. Somehow I stay upright. Out of the turn I pump my legs again. Only one rider is ahead of me. It's Slice. I recognize his red mountain bike. The red stripes on his helmet. If I can beat him, I'll win.



I get closer. Rocks fly from his tires. One

last hill and dip. Then the finish line. My legs burn. My lungs ache.

Now I'm even with Slice. I glance over. He looks back at me and scowls. *Yeah, it's me, I feel like saying. You're about to lose to little Austin Jackson.*

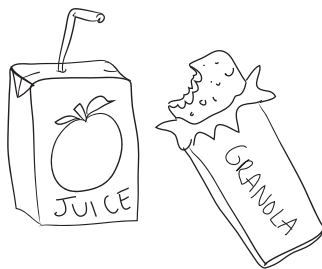
We're on the last hill. He speeds up. So do I. I reach the top ahead of him. All at once my back tire jumps. The next second, I'm flying off my bike, screaming.



I sit up in my sleeping bag, panting. My pj's are wet with sweat. The tent is quiet. I must not have yelled. Or Mom and Dad

would be hovering. Asking if I'm okay. I'm sick of these nightmares. My accident happened over a year ago. But it still feels like yesterday.

I unzip my bag. Throw on my clothes. Open the tent flap. Step outside. The sun is just coming up. It turns the sky orange. Lightens the nearby hills. I rub my arms. Even with my hoodie, I'm freezing. The desert is so cold at night. And then hot during the day. Weird.



From the cooler I grab a juice box. Down it in a few gulps. I scarf a granola bar. My brothers' bikes lean against the van. My

chest tightens when I see them. I used to love riding. Loved racing. But after two broken legs. A broken arm. A month in the hospital. I decided I'm never riding again. Ever.

I grab my backpack. Cram a water bottle inside. Head for the trail.

“Austin?”

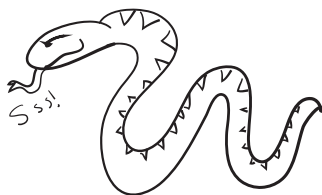
I turn. Dad's sticking his head out the tent. “You okay?” he asks.

I roll my eyes. “Yes.”

“Did you have a bad dream?”

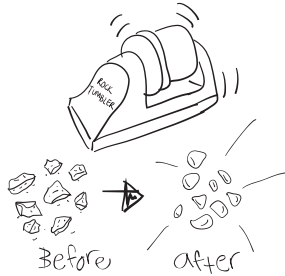
I take a deep breath. I don't answer.

He looks at me. Then he says, “Don't go too far. Stay within shouting distance. And watch for snakes.”



“Yeah, Dad. I know.”

He frowns. Slips back inside the tent. He’s not happy I’m going out on my own. But he knows I need to get away. I hate watching them gear-up to ride. It makes me feel sorry for myself. It also makes me jumpy. Scared.



I fling my pack over my shoulder. I don’t care about riding anyway. I have a new hobby. Mom and Dad got me a rock tumbler for my birthday. Seeing dull old rocks turn shiny? Awesome. A year ago I was Austin Jackson, mountain-bike racer. Now I’m Austin Jackson, rock collector.

“Awesome,” I mutter.