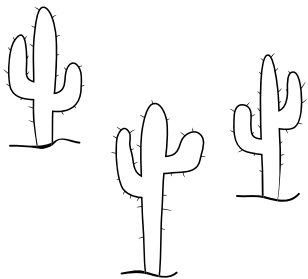


RACER



M.G. HIGGINS



MEET THE



**AUSTIN
JACKSON**

Age: 11

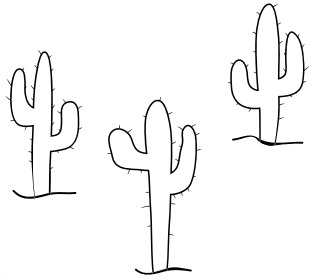
Favorite Movie: *E.T.*

Favorite Food: waffles with strawberry jelly

Future Plans: become a geologist

Best Quality: honesty

CHARACTERS



**SLICE
JONES**

Age: 12

Favorite Movie: *Rad*

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

Future Plans: create a BMX clothing line

Best Quality: endurance

1

NIGHTMARE

I'm riding too fast. Maybe I should slow down. I tap my brakes. The bike leans around a corner. My foot scrapes the dirt. Somehow I stay upright. After the turn, I pump my legs again.

Only one rider is ahead of me. It's Slice Jones. His bike and helmet give him away. Each have a large red stripe. If I can beat Slice, I'll win.

I inch closer. Rocks fly up from his tires.



One last hill remains. The finish line comes next.

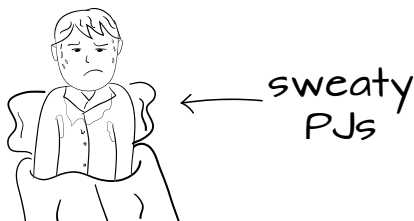
Now I'm even with Slice. He looks over at me. A scowl crosses his face.

I confidently look back at him. *Yeah, it's me. You're going to lose to Little Austin.*

We're on the last hill. He speeds up. I do too. Finally, I move ahead of him. I'm in the lead. The top of the hill is in front of me.

Suddenly, my back tire jumps. Then I'm screaming as I fly off the bike.

Panting, I sit up in my sleeping bag. The bike race was just a bad dream. My pajamas are wet with sweat. The tent is quiet. My parents are not hovering over me. I must not have yelled out loud.

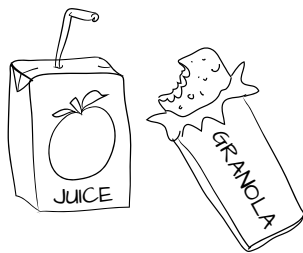


I'm sick of these nightmares. My accident happened almost a year ago. But it seems like yesterday.

I unzip my sleeping bag. Then I get dressed. Opening the tent flap, I see the sun. It's just coming up. Shades of orange and red color the sky. Light shines on nearby hills.

Stepping outside, I feel the chilly air. I rub my arms. Even with my hoodie, I'm freezing. The desert is so cold at night. But it gets hot during the day.

A juice box sounds good. I grab one from the cooler. It's gone in a few gulps. Then I eat a granola bar.



Mountain bikes lean against my parents' SUV. They belong to my brothers. Seeing the bikes makes my chest feel tight.

I once loved riding and racing mountain bikes. But my crash changed me. Breaking an arm and leg was too much. It seemed I would never heal. After that, I decided not to ride again.

I need to clear my mind. Hiking sounds like a good idea. The desert will get hotter soon. I'll get thirsty. I cram a water bottle inside my backpack.

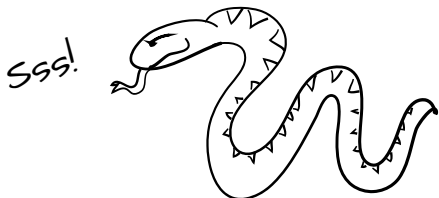
"Austin?" My dad sticks his head out of the tent. "Are you okay?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes."

"Did you have a bad dream?"

He always knows. I take a deep breath. But I don't answer.

“Don’t go far. Stay within shouting distance. And watch for snakes.”



“Yeah, Dad. I know.”

Frowning, he slips back inside the tent. He’s not happy I’m going out on my own. That is clear. But he knows I need to get away. My brothers will gear up with him to ride soon. Watching that is hard.

I fling my backpack over my shoulder. Riding doesn’t matter anymore. There’s something else I like doing now. I got a rock tumbler for my birthday. My parents gave it to me. It’s super cool. I can make dull rocks shine.



Once I was Austin Jackson, mountain bike racer. Now I'm Austin Jackson, rock collector. *Hmm. I'm not sure how I feel about that.*

2

OFF LIMITS

Flowers line the hiking trail. I follow its path then climb a hill. At the top, I look below. The campground is packed. Campers and trailers fill the lots. A few tents have sprung up too. My dad says he likes our tent. But I want to get a camper.

It's Saturday. This is the first race weekend of spring. Bikes are everywhere. My older brothers, Jeb and Cal, will practice today. Tomorrow, they race.

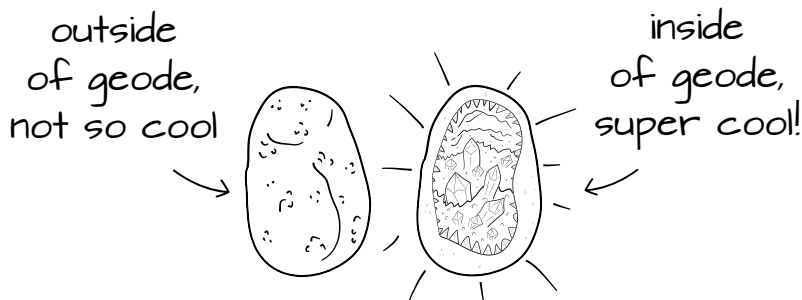


A flash of red catches my eye. An RV is pulling into the campground. This RV is bigger than most. I clench my jaw. It's Slice. His family must love that fire-engine-red stripe. It is not only on Slice's bike and gear. Their RV has it too. Even their car has the stripe.

I grip my backpack's straps. Then I climb down the hill.

My dad said to stay close. But I don't. These hills are nice. This is a good place to find rocks too. I can keep them. The land is public. My parents checked.

Today I'm hunting for geodes. They are pretty cool. On the outside, they're plain and rough. But inside they may be full of crystals. No one knows until they're opened. I'm also looking for turquoise. If I'm lucky, I'll find a fossil.



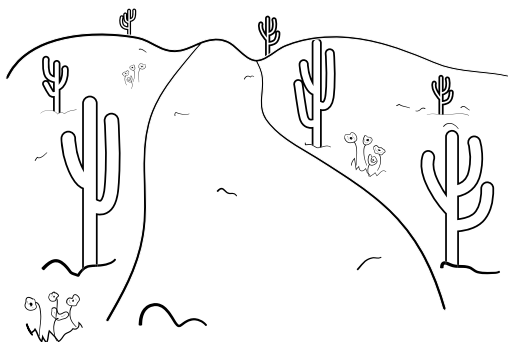
Two hours pass. I've found one geode. Other rocks I find are plain. They might polish well in the tumbler, though. But there's no turquoise or fossils. I hope to get better rocks before lunch.

There is a sign near the trail. It marks areas with protected animals and plants.

Riders aren't allowed off bike trails. Walkers like me must stay on hiking trails. Those rules help protect nature.

Drinking my water, I look past the sign. Cacti and shrubs are everywhere. There are colorful wildflowers too. I think about what

I see. *This place is really beautiful. I'm glad it's protected.*



Soon I feel warmer. The weather is beginning to heat up. I start to pull off my hoodie. A noise makes me pause. It's a sound I know well. A bike is coming. Someone is riding fast.

I quickly turn around. The rider passes me. I catch a glimpse of their helmet. Then the rider heads into the protected area. It shocks me. *That's crazy! Did that really just happen?*

I run up to the sign. But I don't dare pass it. The rider is long gone.



Did I see a red stripe? Was that Slice? Why would he ride into that area? Other riders wear red too. But this shade of red was bright. It was fire-engine red. The more I think about it, the surer I am. That was Slice.

Someone needs to know. Protected life could be in danger.

Before I head back, I look down. A

brownish-gray lump lies on the ground. It's on the protected side of the sign. The shape is like a big rock. But it's moving.

RACER

There is nothing that
can make me ride
again. Or is there?




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