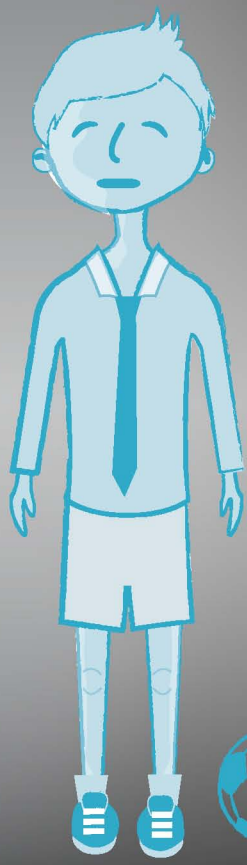


# The GIFT



*Jim Westcott*





MEET THE



**Zeke**

**Age:** 11

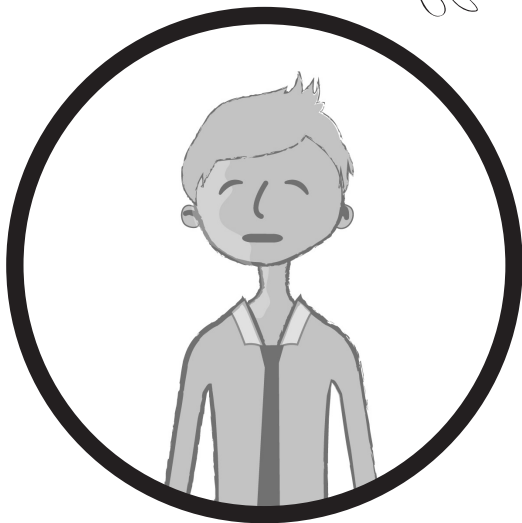
**Favorite Breakfast:** Froot Loops cereal with milk and sliced bananas

**Secret Wish:** wants his parents to be nice to each other

**Favorite Hobby:** rock hunting for gemstones

**Best Quality:** very open-minded

# CHARACTERS



## ANDREW

**Age:** would have been 11

**Family Pet:** a sheepdog named Rags (who can still see him)

**Favorite Afterlife Stunt:** going through walls and locked doors

**Wanted to Be:** a stand-up comedian

**Best Quality:** loves his family

1

# TRAPPED

My mom and dad are opposites. They never agree.



“Zeke, let’s go. Practice time. Let’s do it. Three hundred kicks,” Dad says.

“You don’t have to. Soccer is supposed to be fun,” Mom says.

“You baby him,” Dad says. He says this a lot. “Come on.”

“Well, Coach,” she yells back. “Keep it up. He’s gonna hate soccer. And you!”

I am trapped. I hate being in the middle.

“Tell your mom you like soccer,” Dad yells.

“Tell your dad you hate it,” Mom yells.

Still trapped.



↑  
STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

They don’t get it. Truth is, I like soccer a lot. I’m pretty good. But Dad is always in my face. Yelling at me in front of my team. He



only yells at me.

I don't hate my dad. He just gets ... excited.



Then Mom tells Dad something. Something I wish she hadn't. But I don't say anything. Wish I had. She says I want to quit the team. Because of him.

"This true, Zeke?" my dad asks in his coach's voice.

I look down. Can't say a word. He walks away.

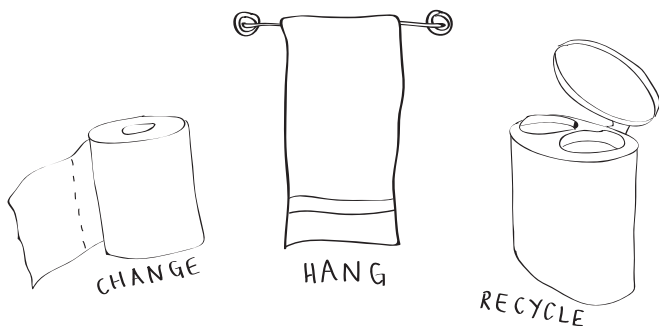
Then he leaves. Moves out. I am no longer part of their tug-of-war.



Mom says she's sorry. Says it's not my fault. I know, I guess. They always fought.

Mom is great at "mom" stuff. But sometimes she drives me nuts. She worries. And now that Dad's gone, she doesn't stop. Jeez. He's only been gone a few days.

## "MOM STUFF"



"What's wrong, Zeke?"

"You look down."

"School okay?"

"You okay?"





“Talk to me. You can tell me.”

“What’s wrong?”

I reply with my usual.

“Nothing, Mom.”

“I’m fine.”

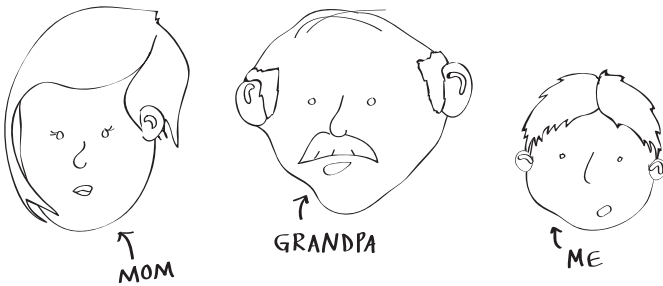
“Fine, Mom.”

“Fine, okay?”

“I. Am. Fine.”

“Nothing.”

“I hate that word,” she says.



Home now is Mom, Grandpa, and me. It feels like a new life. One I don't want. But school is the same. Always. Boring.

