

----> ALSO BY CHRISTINA USS <----

THE ADVENTURES OF A GIRL CALLED BICYCLE

THE  
COLOSSUS  
OF  
ROADS  
CHRISTINA  
USS

MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS  
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Margaret Ferguson Books

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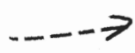
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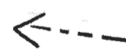




To kids in backseats everywhere, who wonder  
if their talents matter



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# CHEESEBURGERS! YES!

RICK RUSEK'S STOMACH grumbled, trying to get his attention. He ignored it and sat back on his heels, gazing at the rectangle of heavy-gauge aluminum on his bedroom floor. The sign looked a lot better now that he'd swabbed it in the bathtub with some wet paper towels. He admired its clean lines, black words bold and solid against the candy-corn-orange background:

ROAD WORK NEXT 5 MILES

It was Wednesday night, and his radio played the all-weather all-traffic station on low volume. He listened with half an ear to reports of cars clogging Los Angeles freeways and desert winds sweeping toward the Pacific Ocean.

Rick had never been to the beach, even though the California coast was only thirty miles from his home, but the constant noise of cars driving by outside his window was what he imagined ocean waves sounded like. That is, if the ocean's rhythmic *whoosh-shoosh* got punctuated by

the occasional shark on a thundering motorcycle, or by dolphins booming bass-heavy hip-hop.

He flipped the sign over and studied the back. A two-foot-long chunk of the metal pole that had originally held it up was still attached with thick, rusty nuts and bolts. Rick carefully ran a finger over the ridges of one bolt. Once upon a time, all these bits of steel had been shiny and the sign had been new. “How long has it been since you’ve gotten to do your job, sign?” he murmured. “I bet you didn’t like lying in the dirt instead of telling cars what’s coming.”

The squeak and groan of the front door opening startled Rick out of his one-sided conversation. He shot a glance at the clock. Dad was the latest he’d ever been. Rick usually stayed with his next-door neighbors, the Herreras, after school, until Mom or Dad came to get him. Their town house shared a wall with his town house. But the Herreras had plans that evening, so when his dad had called to let them know he was going to be late, he’d told Rick to walk home, lock the door, and wait. He’d suggested that since Rick was eleven now, it could be considered one of his trial runs of Pre-Teen Responsibility, a phrase both parents had been using a lot lately. Rick had taken a slight detour to collect the sign from an empty lot near his house.

*Dinner!* Rick’s stomach burbled. *Finally!*

“I’m home!” his father called. The sound of steps and jingling car keys headed toward the kitchenette.

“In my room, Dad!” Rick replied, standing up. The steps and jingling moved upstairs and became a knock and a turning doorknob.

“Hey there.” Dad came in and gave Rick a one-armed hug, his scruffy sideburns rubbing against Rick’s ear. “Sorry I didn’t get home sooner, but it was a rough day to drive the Five.” “The Five,” short for the 5 Freeway, was one of a dozen long, slow-moving freeways that could turn nightmarish at rush hour. Rick’s mom and dad ran a catering business delivering gourmet Polish food around Los Angeles. Navigating traffic was as much a part of their job as cooking tasty food. “The traffic made us late setting up a lunch buffet, then late delivering for a dinner event. Mom’s still finishing the prep work for tomorrow’s cooking. She’ll be home with the delivery van . . . oh, sometime before next week, if we’re lucky.”

Dad noticed the ROAD WORK sign amid the shorts and socks on the floor. “Found something else? Kiddo, Mom’s not going to be impressed with your level of Pre-Teen Responsibility when you’re bringing home more roadside junk.”

“Dad, this is not roadside junk,” Rick said, turning the sign right-side up. Bringing this home was nothing like bringing the broken traffic light lens he’d found last week. “This is a high-intensity prismatic sign with corrosion-resistant engineering-grade metal and everything. It needed someone to care about it.”

“And that just had to be you, huh?” Dad sat down



heavily on Rick's bed. "Well, maybe you can tell me more while we have some dinner. Oh no, dinner!" Dad groaned and rubbed his eyes with the palms of both hands. "I was supposed to stop by the supermarket on the way home. We haven't got anything in the house to eat except left-over cabbage rolls. I don't think I can even look at another cabbage roll."

"They wouldn't be my first choice, either," said Rick. Mom and Dad's catering business was called Smotch, the first syllable from the Polish word *Smaczniego*, which means "Enjoy your meal!" in Polish, like *Bon appétit* does in French. (Mom explained that *smacz* rhymed with *watch* and *niego* rhymed with *Lego* to non-Polish speakers.) Mom had started the business five years ago, and it was a hit. She was known for the wonderful meals she made from scratch and delivered the same day she prepared them. Soon she had so many orders, she rented space in an industrial kitchen in their neighborhood. Dad had decided to quit working as a graphic designer to help her prepare and deliver her kielbasas (smoked sausages), pierogi (pasta pockets filled with everything from potatoes and cheese to blueberries), cabbage rolls stuffed with meat and rice, creamy mushrooms, cucumber salad, spicy horseradish sauce, and especially her soft rye bread.

Los Angeles was a big place, spanning five hundred square miles. Mom and Dad fed hungry folks all over the area, from their not-so-fancy suburb in the arid San Fernando Valley to swanky places like Beverly Hills and

Marina del Rey. With so much time spent cooking and driving, the Rusek family often ended up eating leftovers. None of them liked eating Polish food anywhere near as much as they had before the business took off.

“What’ll we do? We don’t even have bread or eggs,” Dad said. “Pretty sure we have some canned beets . . . or . . .” He trailed off, looking at Rick’s walls as if some appetizing inspiration might jump out. “Say, did you put up some more maps?”

“Yep,” Rick said proudly. “Figured out a bunch more ways to fix traffic patterns.” Over the past few years, he’d thumbtacked dozens of multicolored map pages from a spiral-bound LA street atlas to his walls. Under each map he’d taped a piece of graph paper filled with precisely penciled grids, arrows, and measurements. He called these his Snarl Solutions, his unique ideas about how to improve traffic flow. Rick tried hard to make them look like they’d been crafted by a professional traffic engineer.

It was the most fun hobby: he’d trace a route on a map from his atlas, then use his computer to examine it up close on Google Street View, where a few clicks of his mouse allowed him to spin in 360 degrees as if he were standing in the middle of any street or freeway in the city. (His second-grade teacher had introduced Rick and the other students to this online tool so they could “visit” neighborhoods in countries like Mexico, Germany, and South Korea.) Rick traveled the streets of LA from the comfort of his bedroom, saw what road signs were already

there, and then recorded his ideas on how they could be better. He had the sense that little changes, like lowering or increasing the speed limit or shifting the location of a sign by a couple of feet so drivers could see it sooner, would have a big impact. Too bad he'd never been able to see if his theories worked.

“Huh. I guess it’s like wallpaper telling our family history through streets and freeways,” Dad mused. The few places Rick had been driven to in LA, plus every place his parents had delivered food, were on these walls. Since he was six, he and his dad had sat down at the dining room table to map out the best route to every new delivery location. Rick wished he could be as useful as his much-older twin brothers, Aleks and Thomas, who’d helped with cooking, delivering, serving, plus watching Rick, before they’d moved out last year to attend college, but Dad insisted Rick’s contribution was just as important. Both brothers were studying at UCLA, living in the dorms and working on-campus jobs, so they were too busy to visit home often.

“There’s just something about printed maps,” his dad was saying now. “You can trust a paper map. They don’t print it unless they’re sure it’s right. Our darn GPS always wants me to turn right into people’s houses or turn left off cliffs.” Ignoring the graph-paper grids, he pointed to one map. “I remember here in Hollywood when we catered the premiere for that movie about Marie Curie. And this map shows city hall, where the palm trees dropped fronds

into the bowl of mushrooms. And here's your old school. The Ruseks—a family history measured in mileage!" He stood studying the maps until Rick's stomach let out a loud growl: *Forgetting dinner?*

Dad rubbed his eyes again. "What would you eat right now if you could?"

"Anything but cabbage rolls, really," Rick said. His stomach gurgled in 100 percent agreement.

"If only I could teleport us to In-N-Out Burger for Double-Double cheeseburgers," his dad said dreamily.

*Cheeseburgers!* Rick's stomach called out. *Yes! Let's go now!*

"Cheeseburgers! Yes! Let's go now!" Rick repeated without thinking.

Dad grimaced and said, "Oh, kiddo." Rick knew that meant no. Rick's motion sickness had ruled his family's life since he was a toddler. No medication had yet been able to cure it, so his parents drove him places only when it was strictly necessary. His family knew every restaurant within a four-mile radius that offered delivery, but they never ate at them in person. (Rick's new gastroenterologist had called his nausea "intervention-resistant" and half-jokingly recommended they consider moving to a city with no cars, like Venice, Italy. "But don't they use boats there?" Mom had wailed. "What about seasickness?")

In-N-Out did not deliver. "Maybe I should pick up an order and bring it home?" Dad said without enthusiasm.

“Too bad takeout doesn’t do In-N-Out’s food justice.” The drive there and back was long enough that burgers arrived home cold, congealed, and sad. “Nah, let’s forget cheeseburgers and order Chinese.” He scrolled through his contacts on his phone and tapped the number. “Delivery, please. What? That’s too long a wait for us, thanks anyway.” He tried the Indian place and found out their delivery person’s car had broken down. Then he called the Pizza Shoppe. “Hello? Yes, we’d like a large half-pepperoni, half-pineapple for delivery. How long will it take?” Dad mouthed *an hour and a half* at Rick while rolling his eyes. “I guess it is what it is,” he said, giving their address.

After he hung up, Rick and Dad shared a hungry, disappointed look. Dad said, “I can’t believe how busy these places are in the middle of the week.”

“Maybe you could call Mom and ask her to bring something home?” Rick suggested.

Dad shook his head. “It’s been such a tough day for both of us, I don’t want to ask her to do one more thing. Besides, she might not get here any earlier than the pizza.”

Usually, Rick’s stomach encouraged staying home and waiting for delivery, but tonight it was acting strange. It started repeating *cheeseburgers cheeseburgers cheeseburgers* like a sacred chant.

*There’s no way*, Rick told it. *Shush.*

His stomach paused its chanting and said, *But cheeseburgers. Maybe try the breathing thing?* The gastroenterologist had given Rick a deep-breathing technique that she

said might help. Rick had been to a lot of doctors, and this new one had some pretty odd ideas.

If his stomach was game, Rick was willing. “Dad—what if we don’t give up on In-N-Out that easily? Remember the deep-breathing exercise the doctor suggested? I can give it a shot,” he said.

Dad perked up. “Do you think it could work?” Rick could see parental concern fighting with burger cravings on his father’s face.

“We won’t know until we try,” Rick said. He dug out the paper from the doctor describing what to do from his desk drawer. “And if it does, cheeseburgers.”

*CHEESEBURGERS!* his stomach shouted.

Dad took Rick’s right hand in both of his own and shook it solemnly. “You’re a brave young man. And I’m a hungry dad. And like you said, we won’t know until we try.” Dad called to cancel the pizza and they headed downstairs to the carport.

Rick opened the back door of his dad’s old Jeep, repeating the breathing sequence to himself under his breath. *In-two-three-four, hold-two-three-four, out-two-three-four.* He was supposed to pinch closed alternating nostrils on the ins and outs. It was complicated.

Dad smiled nervously into the rearview mirror and turned on the ignition. “Right. We’re doing this. Seize the day.”

The car reversed onto Foothill Boulevard. Rick rolled his window halfway down and breathed in to the count

of four. He kept doggedly breathing and counting, but at the first intersection, he had to grab a double-reinforced airsickness bag from the thick wad tucked into the seat pocket in front of him. His parents ordered them in bulk on the internet.

*Why are you breathing so slowly?* his stomach blorped at him. *Is this the breathing exercise? Need more oxygen! Not going to make it!* Then it made a sound like a herd of unhappy moose bellowing *Nooooo*.

Rick ditched the exercises, gulped in air, and started focusing his attention out the window as hard as he could on the street signs and how the cars around them were driving. He invited his mind to try to solve traffic puzzles instead of worrying over the disastrous things happening inside his body. His dad looked at him in the rear-view mirror and pulled into a hardware store parking lot nowhere near their destination.

“This was a mistake,” Dad said. “We’re going to park here until you feel better, and then we’re going back home.”

Rick didn’t respond because he couldn’t. While they waited, his dad called the Pizza Shoppe to reinstate their order. Once his stomach had quieted somewhat, he signaled Dad in the rearview mirror. Dad pulled out carefully and Rick concentrated extra-hard on the road signs, begging his digestive system to give him a break.

*I can’t help my gut reactions,* his stomach argued. *Your part of the deal is not to put me in these situations.*

*You were the one chanting about cheeseburgers!* Rick answered. *You said we should try the breathing techniques!*

*You know I'm an organ of your body and I only talk in your imagination, right?* his stomach said. *My bad choices belong to both of us.*

Back home, Rick crawled onto the couch and whimpered. Dad laid a cool, wet washcloth across his forehead and placed a cup of water from the kitchen sink within Rick's reach. "What was I thinking?" he said. "I'm so sorry. Guess deep breathing is yet another cure that doesn't work for you."

Rick waved vaguely.

Dad said, "Maybe we don't tell your mother about this? She'd kill me."

Rick gave him a thumbs-up. If he could help it, he didn't want more than one parent hovering over him. He lay in ruins for a while. When he was ready to speak, he croaked, "Can you tell me about the traffic problems you had on the way home?"

"Oh, son, how about we leave traffic discussions for another day?" Dad said, taking a container of cabbage rolls out of the refrigerator. He stuck his tongue out at them and slid them back into the fridge.

Rick reluctantly pulled his mind away from the tantalizing riddle of his dad's drive home. Dad always said he appreciated Rick's help with mapping delivery routes, but both he and especially Mom treated Rick's passion for studying traffic patterns as a strange phase Rick was



bound to outgrow, like when he'd insisted on wearing a Spider-Man mask to bed.

Understanding traffic wasn't the same as loving a Spider-Man mask. Rick distinctly remembered when he'd started getting carsick on the way to day care near Dad's work as a little kid. Even before he could recite his ABCs without forgetting the whole section between Q and W, he understood that the road signs said important things that made a difference to how the cars moved. Staring out the window to study the cars and signs took his mind off the nausea.

*That was when we started talking*, his stomach reminded him. Rick told his stomach how he thought different road signs might make the traffic move better. Having those conversations seemed to calm it down. *And one time, I said maybe you'd been bitten by a radioactive spider and this was your resulting superpower. And then you wore your Spider-Man mask to bed every night*, his stomach added. Okay, so the two things were related. But he'd outgrown one. The other one grew with him, like his skin.

"Tell me about the new school," his dad said. "Are you finding the work challenging enough?" Both Dad and Mom were worried that the school Rick had transferred to for fifth grade might be crummy.

"Sure. Plenty of challenges," Rick answered.

"Like...?" Dad prompted.

Rick said, "Ummmmm..." Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary's most striking feature was how every hallway was

plastered with quotes from famous people exhorting the students to reach higher, believe harder, and never give up on anything. “The art teacher has a museum curator coming to talk to us tomorrow.” He propped himself on his elbows and sipped some water while he tried to think of something else to say. His stomach questioned whether it wanted any water yet. His face must have shown it, because his dad winced.

Dad took the cup from Rick and sat down next to him on the couch. “Someday, son. Someday this won’t be a challenge for you. And on that day, we’ll zoom to In-N-Out and eat fresh, hot burgers and fries there until our heads explode.”

*Someday cheeseburgers?* his stomach asked, sounding apologetic. *Fresh and hot In-N-Out Double-Doubles?*

“Someday,” Rick said, wishing he believed it was true.

## DO THE RIGHT THING

RICK HAD TRANSFERRED to a school within walking distance of home this year for fifth grade because his old math-and-science magnet school had changed his bus route last winter. While the old route had made him pretty sick, the new one had been agonizing. His parents had tried rearranging their schedule so one of them could drive him to school and home to the Herreras' to save him the embarrassment of losing his breakfast or lunch on the bus while horrified fellow students looked on. Adding exhausting hours to Mom's or Dad's already-epic driving days was hardly worth it—driving with his folks dialed back the motion sickness but didn't eliminate it.

Rick's town-house complex had a full block-long sidewalk with concrete right up to each front stoop, but once Rick crossed at the light to walk toward Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary, the sidewalks were broken and disconnected. The homeowners in the neighborhood between him and the school didn't seem to take much pride in keeping up their properties. Rick ended up walking to

school across crumbling driveways and unkempt front yards, hoping not to get chased by too many dogs.

Walking this route the next morning, Rick noticed how the cars crawling along in the street didn't sound very oceanlike when you were next to them. Honking and hiccupping exhaust in his face, they made the hot August morning feel even hotter. He scanned the small empty lot where he'd found the ROAD WORK sign but didn't see anything else worth bringing home.

After dodging one tiny, yappy dog and entering Eleanor Roosevelt's double doors, he passed his ten-year-old neighbor, Mila Herrera, on his way to homeroom. She gave him a small smile while walking under the poster of Spike Lee telling them to DO THE RIGHT THING, but she didn't say anything.

Rick returned her smile. Her silence didn't bother him. He knew she wasn't a particularly talkative person. He'd been going to Mila's house after school every day since his brothers had moved out for college. He'd spent a good chunk of the past summer over there, too, since Aleks and Thomas had won scholarships to attend special summer civic engagement classes.

School had been in session for a week, and Mila was the only person he knew so far. He knew he could cope with being a loner; he just didn't want to be one. At his old magnet school, his classmates lived scattered around the city, and after a while his friends' parents had become

unwilling to drive the distance to bring their kids to Rick's house. When several friends had started Pee Wee football, Rick had tried joining, too, so he could see them at practices and games, but having to lie prone on the bench trying to get his stomach to stop howling meant he wasn't much of a team player. He'd only made it to two practices before he gave up.

It was hard to start at a new school, but on the positive side, it meant shedding the nickname Carsick Rick. The odds were good he could protect himself from that nickname here. He also had a plan to fit in. He'd focus on joining conversations about the video game *Ninja Smash Warriors* (he'd reached the thirteenth level) and never mentioning his subscription to *Traffic Technology Today* to anyone. Not talking about his favorite hobby was definitely the way to go. When he was younger, he thought if he explained his Snarl Solutions well enough, other people would think they were as interesting as he did. But he'd learned his lesson in third grade when the teacher had taught them similes, describing comparisons using *like* or *as*, like "the vanilla milkshake was as white as snow." He'd read his long list out loud, including "traffic is like an ant farm," "traffic is like water drops chasing each other down a shower curtain," and "traffic is like pouring rice through a funnel." The similes didn't interest anyone. Even the teacher's eyes had glazed over. He wouldn't make that mistake here.

Rick struggled not to yawn through his English and

social studies classes, pretending to take notes but doodling instead. So far, his teachers were teaching stuff he'd already learned last year. He thought his parents weren't wrong to worry that Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary might be kind of a crummy school.

Art class promised to be different today, at least. The teacher tapped on the board with a pointer to get everyone's attention. She announced, "As promised, we have a special visitor today from the California Museum of Ancient Art to tell us about the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Professor, take it away."

The professor started up a slideshow. "Now, most of you probably know about the last standing Wonder of the World, the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt." He showed a picture of a yellow-hued pyramid surrounded by sand. "But there were others, including the Hanging Gardens of Babylon"—a painting of plants cascading over a white building with lots of pillars and stairs—"the Lighthouse of Alexandria"—another painting, of a super-tall lighthouse surrounded by clouds—"and the Colossus of Rhodes." This last one was a black-and-white sketch of a giant naked guy with a crown like the Statue of Liberty's.

The class immediately starting buzzing with laughter. "Settle down!" their teacher exclaimed. "This is very educational!" The professor looked flustered. Rick felt bad for him, so he raised his hand.

"Excuse me, who was the Colossus of Roads? Was he famous for building the first roads somewhere in the

ancient world?” If that was true, Rick thought he’d enjoy learning more about him.

“No, no,” the professor said, “not roads like we drive on, it’s the Colossus of Rhodes, an island in the Greek archipelago. *RHodes*.” He made an emphatic breathy sound on the letter *h* and then clicked ahead in his slideshow to where Rick could see it written down. This slide had nothing but words and dates on it, so the students quieted down somewhat. “The Colossus was a bronze statue of the Greek sun god Helios, by far the tallest statue known to the public in two ninety-two BC.” Rick pretended he was interested in the next details, because he could see the professor was getting his groove back, but was a little disappointed the discussion wasn’t going to circle around to ancient freeways.

Rick doodled a fully clothed man standing over a freeway, holding a speed limit sign like a spear. He wrote *THE COLOSSUS OF ROADS* in angular Greek-looking letters underneath it. A much better nickname than Carsick Rick, for sure. Was there a way to start up your own nickname? He looked around at his classmates. Nah, he’d stick with video games and hope for the best. He didn’t need another nickname with a potential for provoking laughter.

At lunchtime, Rick found an empty seat at a cafeteria table with kids arguing over which video games were the best. He tried interjecting something about *Ninja Smash Warriors* into the conversation, but a kid sitting at the far

end of the table widened his eyes and shook his head at Rick ever so slightly, so he clammed up.

After the final bell, he waited under the baking sun with the handful of students who walked home. The teachers wouldn't let the walkers leave until every school bus had been loaded and every car-line kid was picked up, presumably to protect vulnerable pedestrians from impatient parents speeding into and out of the school driveway. Almost no one walked at Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary, probably for the same reasons Mila caught the bus home instead of walking with Rick: disconnected sidewalks, few crosswalks, and territorial dogs.

When Rick got to the Herreras', Mrs. Herrera threw open the door at the first knock, hugging Rick and kissing him on the top of his head as she ushered him into the kitchen. She was an unstoppably huggy-kissy kind of lady. He didn't mind it so much as long as no one from school ever saw her doing it. Mila and her baby sister, Daniela, didn't count.

"Hungry, Rick? I can make you eggs, I can make you arepas, I have mangos." Mrs. Herrera tried to feed anyone who was sitting still, and made some really interesting food. Her arepas were these cornmeal pancake things she would grill on the stove and fill with stuff like shredded beef or chicken or butter and cheese.

"Thanks, Mrs. Herrera. If you have some arepas around, I would like one with that crumbly cheese," Rick said. "Hi, Mila. Hi, Baby Daniela." When he'd started coming last year, Mom had pulled Mrs. Herrera aside to



explain that Rick would arrive sweaty and unable to say much after the ride and would have no interest in snacks for at least an hour. It was a nice change to walk right in and talk about food.

Mila sat at the table finishing some deep-yellow mango slices. “Hi,” she said. She nearly always beat him home. (When she’d found out Rick was switching schools and would be walking, she’d asked his mom, “Doesn’t Rick want to take the bus with me? The driver is really nice, and our street is the first stop in the afternoon.” When his mom had started to answer, “Oh, the bus doesn’t work for Rick,” he’d clutched her hand to stop her from revealing anything humiliating. He wanted as few people as possible knowing the details of his affliction.)

Seven-month-old Baby Daniela was nodding and blinking slowly, buckled securely into a plastic chair clipped onto the edge of the kitchen table, a shred of mango clutched in one fist. As Rick sat down, he watched her eyes close and her head sink to her chest. She didn’t relinquish her grip on the mango, though. Not even a nap could get between Baby Daniela and a munchie.

Mrs. Herrera put a plate in front of him with two but-tery, toasty arepas topped with a crumbly fresh cheese from the Mexican grocery store, plus a cut-up orange and a glass of guava punch. *Hooray!* his stomach burbled. No matter what you asked for, Mrs. Herrera served you at least one thing more. Her snacks made her one of his stomach’s favorite people. If it wouldn’t have embarrassed

his parents, Rick would have suggested they regularly invite themselves over here for dinner.

“Lots of homework today, kids? Or do you want to join me and Abuelita and watch the race?” Mrs. Herrera asked. When the family wasn’t watching soccer games broadcast from other countries, they were watching international bike races. Both Dr. and Mrs. Herrera had special cycling outfits in the same colors as the Venezuelan flag, and Dr. Herrera rode his bike to work as a medical resident over ten miles each way. The only person in their house who owned a car was Mrs. Herrera’s mother, an ancient lady they all called Abuelita.

“I’ve got some graphing I really want to tackle,” said Rick.

“And I’ve got word problems I didn’t finish in class,” said Mila.

“Well, try your best to keep it down in here,” Mrs. Herrera said, winking. She often kidded them about their noisiness, because Mila and Rick could sit together scarcely speaking for hours, doing homework, playing Uno, or watching Cartoon Network. Mila was into art and was always sketching stuff like castles and dragons and unicorns, while Rick worked on his Snarl Solutions. “When you finish, come join us to watch the mountain stage of the race.” She waved her hand in front of her face as if cooling off a sudden fever. “Those racers ride like angels. But such skinny angels!” Then she noticed Baby Daniela’s head tipping even farther down her chest. The

girl let out a little baby snore. “Daniela, *mi vida*, let’s get you in the crib,” Mrs. Herrera said, unbuckling her and tugging the mango shred out of her hand. (*Mi vida*, which means “my life” in Spanish, was what the Herreras called each other.) She grunted as she lifted Daniela and laid the baby’s head on her shoulder, murmuring in her ear. “If you grow up to be a bicycle racer, you will be a strong, sturdy sprinter, not a skinny mountain climber.”

Mila opened her backpack and pulled out her homework. “Is your graphing for school, or are you working on another one of your street things?”

“One of my street things,” Rick said, pulling out two rulers, his best mechanical pencil, and his graph-paper pad. He and his dad had mapped out the best routes to the two events Smotch had catered yesterday, but last night, after the pizza had finally come and been consumed, he’d spent some time on Google Street View virtually visiting these routes. He’d examined the road signs along both the surface streets and the 5 Freeway, and his fingers were itching to sketch out Snarl Solutions based on what he’d seen. Once he studied a map, digitally or on paper, he had it memorized for good.

Mila said, “Oh, okay,” and started in on her sheet of word problems. Rick took a bite of his arepa and sucked the juice from a slice of orange. They both scratched away with their pencils in easy silence.

The kitchen around Rick faded. He didn’t hear Mrs. Herrera cheering cyclists’ names as they cruised up hills.

He didn't hear Abuelita saying, "If I could have raced bicycles when I was younger, I would have gone so fast, they would have nicknamed me *Meteoro*," and Mrs. Herrera answering, "Really? You'd have ridden like a meteor? Then why do you drive so slowly now?" He was lost in a happy place of straight lines and road signs, his stomach chirping delighted comments about the arepas.

Rick reached for the last piece of orange and knocked his pencil to the floor. When he picked it up, he saw that Mila had put away her homework and was watching him.

"Did you know you've been humming?" she asked.

"Humming? I don't think so," Rick said.

"You've had the biggest smile on your face, and you've been humming at your graph paper," Mila said. "You've done it before, but never this loudly. You must really like what you're doing."

Rick looked back at the solutions he'd finalized. With the changes he'd made, he could see his parents having a smooth, flowing trip along the routes they'd taken yesterday instead of being late. He hummed the first notes of the *Ninja Smash Warriors* theme song. He heard himself this time.

Mila covered her smile with her hand.

"Okay, okay, I do hum. I hum awesome ninja-inspiring tunes," Rick acknowledged. "And I do like what I'm doing. See these, here, here, here, here, here, here, *annnd* here? If someone could switch these signs, move these other ones slightly, and decrease the speed limit near this freeway

exit like so, enough drivers would drive properly. That'd tip the balance and things would smooth out for everyone. Small changes tend to cause a chain reaction, like in an ant farm. Once a few ants figure out how to cooperate, the rest of them start doing it too. Ants don't have traffic jams."

Mila responded with a polite but unenthusiastic, "Oh, okay." His shoulders slumped a tiny bit. He questioned for the gazillionth time why the patterns he saw were invisible to everyone he knew. He wondered if a well-trained hunter or tracker who could point out a tiny detail and say "A single male raccoon walked south by this tree two days ago carrying a crawfish in its mouth" had friends and family looking over their shoulders saying, "What? You mean that smudge on the ground means something?"

Mila scrunched up her face a little, like she was trying to think of something more to say. "Maybe you should send these to the people who put up the signs."

Rick shook his head. "I've tried that loads of times, but no one has ever emailed me back. Maybe they can tell my emails are written by a kid, so they think they're not important." In fact, the email address he'd found was supposed to be for traffic complaints, so he'd started wondering if every complaint email fell automatically into some electronic Department of Transportation recycle bin. He sighed. His Snarl Solutions seemed destined to remain nothing more than pieces of graph paper until he was old enough to get a job making them real.