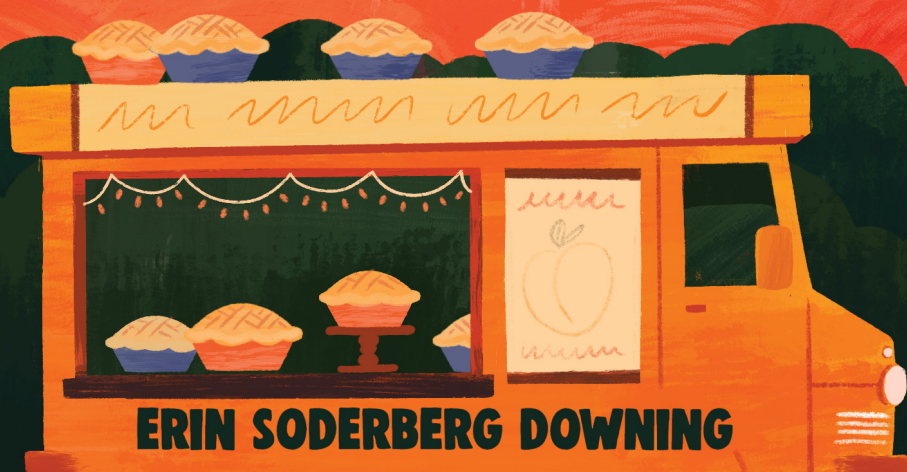


THE GREAT PEACH EXPERIMENT

WHEN LIFE GIVES
YOU LEMONS,
MAKE
PEACH PIE



**WHEN LIFE GIVES
YOU LEMONS,
MAKE PEACH PIE**



THE GREAT PEACH EXPERIMENT

**WHEN LIFE GIVES
YOU LEMONS,
MAKE
PEACH PIE**

BOOK 1

BY ERIN SODERBERG DOWNING

PIXEL+INK

*For my incredible kids,
who are always up for adventure.*



Erin Soderberg Downing is a fiscal year 2020 recipient of an Artist Initiative grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature; and by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Text copyright © 2021 by Erin Soderberg Downing

All rights reserved

Pixel+Ink is a division of TGM Development Corp.

Book design by Michelle Cunningham

Freddy's artwork by Henry Downing

www.pixelandinkbooks.com

First Edition

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020940463

ISBN 9781645950349

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

1

.....

THE PROBLEM WITH PEACHES

Lucy Peach needed a new last name. *Peach* just wasn't working for her anymore. The problem with peaches, she'd come to realize, is they were too soft. Often, the sweet, fuzzy fruit appeared perfect on the outside—but when you bit into one, it surprised you with a mouthful of mushed-up mess. Lucy *Watermelon* would be a better fit, perhaps. Watermelons were tougher.

Twelve-year-old Lucy was busy pondering this and other important matters—such as which book she would dive into first on Saturday, the first day of summer break—when she heard a clank and a screech, followed by a whole lot of noisy clatter. The sound had come from somewhere outside.

Most of the time, noises like this could be attributed to one of Lucy's two younger brothers. Ten-year-old

Freddy loved creating enormous art projects, which often resulted in very messy—and sometimes *loud*—disasters. But with a sound like this, Lucy would put her money on the youngest Peach: Herb. Over the past few years, eight-year-old Herb had built up a huge pile of *stuff* in the garage. Lucy had warned him time and again that it was just a matter of time before it toppled over. She had a sinking suspicion today was that day.

Lucy crawled out of the pillow-stuffed reading fort she'd set up inside her bedroom closet and raced outside to fix whatever disaster needed fixing. Ever since their mom had died nearly two years before, this was Lucy's responsibility: she was the fixer. That's why *Peach* simply didn't cut it anymore . . . it was Lucy's job to be tough, with a thick skin.

Outside, she was surprised to find both Freddy and Herb standing at the edge of the family's postage stamp-sized front lawn. She joined her brothers, and all three kids stared in wonder as a massive, bright orange truck backed up their slim driveway. The truck had knocked over the family's recycling bin, and cans and bottles were scattered everywhere. That, Lucy realized, explained the clatter.

Their dad, Walter, stood at the foot of the driveway, rubbing his hands together like the slightly mad

scientist he was. “Isn’t she a beauty?” Dad asked, waving his arm toward the giant beast of a truck.

“A beauty!” Herb echoed.

“What *is* it?” Lucy asked, reaching down to start gathering up the spilled recycling. She neatly piled the cans and bottles on the lawn, to get them out of the way until she could return them to the bin.

“It’s a food truck,” Dad said, as if that explained everything.

“Are we throwing a party?” Freddy asked, his eyes wide with excitement. Then, as always, Lucy’s middle brother couldn’t resist sharing a few random fun facts. “You can hire a food truck to cater pretty much any kind of event. I saw a show about food trucks, and there’s one that makes cotton candy on the spot. There’s also a truck that serves food made out of meat that would otherwise go to waste—like pigeons and animal feet and other nasty stuff like that. Oh! And there’s another one that sells *fugu*!”

“What’s *fugu*?” little Herb asked, as though that were the most pressing question at the moment.

“Puffer fish. If it’s not prepared correctly, you can die from eating it,” Freddy informed him.

Dad chuckled. “Very interesting, Freddy. But no, we’re not having a party. And we’re definitely not eating *fugu*.”

“Dad,” Lucy said seriously, “*why* is there a food truck in our driveway?”

Walter Peach put on a wobbly smile and gestured to the giant vehicle. “She’s all ours.”

“This food truck . . . ,” Lucy began, feeling a nervous lump form in her stomach, “is *ours*?”

“That’s right,” Dad said. “This summer, the Peaches are going to set out to explore the country!”

Lucy closed her eyes and drew in a sharp breath. “Oh, Dad,” she said, sighing. Their father had done a lot of strange, frustrating, and irresponsible things over the past few years. But this was a new level of crazy. Lucy asked, “In a . . . *food truck*? Why?”

“Traveling the country in a food truck was one of your mother’s big dreams,” Dad explained. “And an adventure like this will be a wonderful way to honor her memory.”

“How are we supposed to pay for this?” she asked.

Dad gave Lucy a secretive smile. It was the kind of smile that made her more than a little worried. “I’ve been sitting on some big news,” he said. “*Very* big news.”

Next to Lucy, hopeful Herb wiggled in anticipation. Freddy rubbed his hands together. Lucy hated seeing her brothers get excited about things she knew were certain to fall apart.

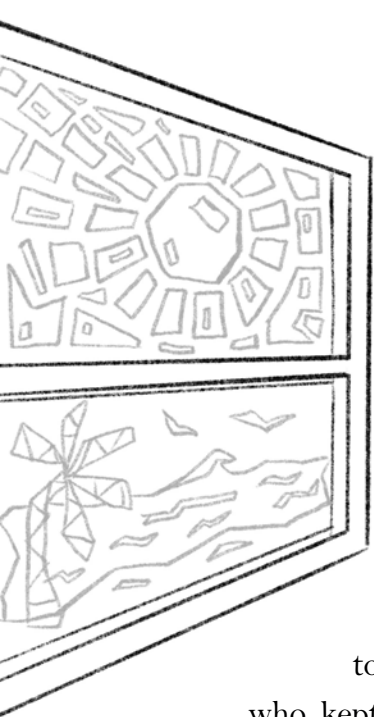
“Kids, one of your mother’s inventions has sold,” Dad finally announced.

Lucy gawped at him. Before she died, their mom, Madeline, had worked as a chemist. She’d invented many things, but none of those things had ever amounted to much. Yet Mom had never seemed to worry about that. She always told her kids that what she loved most about her job was getting to nurture something from the seed of an idea to a finished product, even when the seed didn’t grow quite how she’d expected it to. Their mom always took great joy in the *process* of creating something new, just like Freddy did with his art.

Dad cleared his throat. “Before she got sick, do you remember that your mom was developing solar window clings?”

Of *course* Lucy remembered. She and Freddy had helped Mom come up with that project! After reading an article about solar energy and wind farms, Lucy had asked her mom if there was anything regular people, like the Peaches, could use to catch energy. Then Freddy started going on and on about how *ugly* solar panels and windmills are and asked why no one ever painted them cool colors.

Just a few days later, Mom and her team started creating a special kind of solar cling that could be printed



with lots of fun colors and designs. Regular people could stick them to any window in their house, where they would capture solar power—helping collect energy from the sun—while also turning the window into a piece of art. Mom had even used some of Freddy’s drawings on one of the designs! Though Herb had been too little to help much, he’d been the one who kept Mom company at the lab—hopping and babbling away in his bouncy chair—when she put in extra time at work on weekends.

Dad smiled proudly. “The solar clings were your mother’s *pièce de résistance*, kids. Her lab sold the cling technology to a big company, which is going to mass-produce them. Mom’s share of the profits is one point three million dollars.” Dad held his hands out wide. “Kids, in technical terms, we are millionaires.”

2

.....

THE PLAN

“Millionaires! We are *millionaires!*” Herb wrapped his arms around Lucy’s waist and hugged her tight, screaming with joy.

“A million dollars?” Lucy gasped. Herb loosened his hug. “Are you sure?”

Herb glanced at his big brother, whose mouth was hanging open. Suddenly, Freddy shook his head and said, “Is someone going to deliver a giant check? Will a fancy limo pull up with briefcases full of cash? Can we ask for all the money in two-dollar bills or state quarters?”

“Can we *please* get a pool in our backyard?” Herb begged. “The kind with a slide, and a diving board, and—*ooh! ooh!*—maybe some live fish swimming in the shallow end?”

“Live fish in a pool?” Freddy said with a laugh. “The chlorine would leave you with a pool full of *dead* fish.” His eyes widened, and he added, “Unless we got one of those *saltwater* pools, and we could get a pet shark—”

“Guys,” Lucy said, holding up a hand. “Focus. There’s a food truck parked in our driveway. Remember?”

“Can we use part of the money to go somewhere amazing?” Freddy asked, ignoring their big sister altogether. “I’ve always wanted to visit the Chihuly glass museum in Seattle. While we’re there, we could also check out Seattle’s gum wall, which is this alley covered in millions of pieces of chewed-up gum!” He grinned and high-fived Herb. “It would also be fun to touch a pyramid so we could see how they built those things. And wouldn’t it be great if we could see some of the art in the National Gallery and check out the prison museum in London?” He bounced on his toes and added, “Hey, did you know you can walk inside catacombs filled with dead-guy skulls under the streets of Paris?”

“Now, kids, let’s not get carried away,” Dad said. “Those are all perfectly nice ideas, but I’ve got something even *more* special planned for this money. I think it’s most appropriate for us to use a portion of your mom’s windfall to live out one of her biggest dreams. That’s why this summer, we’ll be exploring the country and

starting up our very own food truck business.” Dad’s voice caught as he swept his arm wide and pointed in the direction of Mrs. Halvorson’s house at the end of their street. “Let’s hit the highway and head out of Duluth. Take some time to live life on the road and reconnect as a family.”

Before any of the kids could ask questions or respond, Dad barreled on. “We’ll kick things off in just a few days, once summer break is officially in session. We can get our feet wet right here in Minnesota. Our first stop will take us a few hours south, to Minneapolis. Then we’re going to head in a mighty loop, visiting Chicago, Ann Arbor, Columbus, Nashville; and if we’re lucky, we’ll even hit Indianapolis and majestic St. Louis.”

In his mind, Herb pictured the illustrated map of the United States that hung on his second-grade classroom wall. He tried to remember where all those cities were, but couldn’t. Tomorrow, he’d spend read-aloud time studying the map. Maybe his teacher would even be willing to take a picture of it and print a copy for him!

Freddy closed his eyes and whispered, “Please tell me this food truck trip means I get to skip summer school?”

Herb couldn’t understand why his brother was dreading summer school. Herb *loved* school. Personally,

he didn't like summer vacation, because it meant saying goodbye—to his beautiful and wise second-grade teacher, his classmates, the class hamster he'd been in charge of feeding each day, his special cubby decorated with puffy stickers, and all the artwork his teacher had collected and carefully hung up throughout the year. Herb had responsibilities in Room 122. And he did not like to say goodbye. At least he had third grade to look forward to.

Dad nodded. "Yes, Freddy, I'm afraid you will likely miss most of summer school. But to make up for it, I ordered some math workbooks so you can practice over the summer." He looked from Herb to Freddy to Lucy. "So . . . ? What do you say? Good adventure, or *great* adventure? I think it's exactly how your mother would have wanted us to spend the money."

Herb clapped and gave Dad a big hug. "That *does* sound like a great adventure!"

"What about your wor—" Lucy began.

But before she could finish her sentence, a man stepped out of the food truck and thrust a clipboard at their dad. "I checked everything over and it all looks good. Sign here to confirm delivery," the guy said, "then I can be on my way."

While the adults took care of business, Herb crept

over to the massive vehicle and popped open the big door at the back. It creaked and groaned as it swung wide. He longed to climb up into the back of the truck to see what treasures were hidden inside, but he couldn't get his knee high enough to slide in. He hopped back down and covered his nose. "Pee-yew," he announced. The truck smelled a lot like their big plastic trash bin next to the garage, the day before the garbage collectors came.

"Mom sold a million-dollar invention and Dad bought a *used* food truck?" Lucy muttered. Herb thought his sister sounded annoyed. But then she gently wrapped her hands under Herb's armpits and boosted him up into the truck. He giggled and rolled aboard.

As soon as Herb was in, Freddy and Lucy hopped up. Standing in tallest-to-shortest order (and longest-to-shortest *hair* order)—Lucy, Freddy, then Herb—the Peach kids looked very much like an age progression of the same person: All had almost matching greenish brown speckled eyes that they'd gotten from their dad, and thick, messy brownish hair that they'd gotten from their mom. Except Herb, who had almost no hair at all (Freddy had helped him shave it all off after head lice took over his second-grade classroom for the fourth time that school year). Though the three kids looked alike, they could not have been more different. But Lucy

always said their differences in personality helped make it easier for the three of them to get along.

Together, the Peach kids began to explore. The inside of the truck was grimy, and the air stale. It smelled awful, and Herb noticed some shriveled-up pieces of old, brown lettuce tucked into a few of the corners. There was also a mound of something orange-green and mysteriously smooshy-looking in the middle of one of the countertops. There were rags tossed about, and a half-full trash can inside a cabinet. How did this “look good,” Herb wondered, remembering what the deliveryman had said.

The space was smaller than Herb would have expected. There was just a long, narrow passageway to walk through, and the rest of the truck’s insides were filled with equipment. One side of the interior had a long metal counter, and underneath was a row of shiny cabinets that slid and swung open. Up above that counter were more shelves and storage areas. Toward the front of the truck was something that looked like a large, shiny oven with a whole bunch of different chambers. There were also several short refrigerators and freezers, a small stove and griddle thing, and even a sink. Herb quickly scanned the space, searching for the beds. Dad had said they would be traveling around the country in

the food truck, and he couldn't figure out where they were going to sleep.

"I call this counter for my bed!" Herb cried out, eager to claim dibs on a prime spot before it was too late.

"We're not going to be *sleeping* in here, you neener," Freddy said, bonking him on the head with his hand.

"Then where *are* we sleeping?" Herb asked.

"Hotels, I assume," Lucy said. This announcement made Herb excited. Hotels had pools!

Just as Herb clamored up onto one of the counters to explore the shelves and cubbies higher up, Dad poked his head around the back door of the truck. "Well?" he prompted. Herb thought his dad looked a little nervous. "What do you think?"

"It needs a good scrubbing," Freddy said, his head buried deep inside one of the fridges. He pulled out a bag with a chunk of something that looked like moldy cheese.

"I think it's beautiful," Herb chimed in.

"The oven is almost new," Dad said proudly, pointing. "Isn't it great? I knew it must be a sign that I was on the right track when I found the perfect used truck for sale. This one was originally a custom-built truck for a family like ours—it has a special cab with two rows and four seatbelts up front, so we can all ride together, plus room underneath the cab for luggage. And everything

is apparently in great working order. It's a pretty basic kitchen, but we'll make do."

"Wait . . .," Lucy said. "You didn't spend a whole million bucks on this piece of junk, did you?" She was the most sensible of the Peach kids. In a very adult-sounding tone, she continued, "I seriously hope you set aside some of the money for other things, like charity and college and paying off debts and retirement savings."

"Y-yes," Dad said, stuttering slightly. "That's exactly right, Lucy. In fact, I donated a large portion of Mom's earnings to a cancer research charity—that's certainly one thing she would have done if she were still alive. I also set a chunk aside to help with college for you kids, and our house payments." He sighed. "But I also thought Mom would like to see me use a small portion of the profits for fun. She was always encouraging me to take more risks and let loose a little. So I put some of the money aside for us to use as a family—ten percent of what remained after taxes."

"Ten percent of \$1.3 million is \$130,000," Herb announced. They had been working on percentages in his special advanced math program that spring.

Lucy added, "So assuming we need to save about forty percent of *that* for taxes, that means we have about 75,000 bucks left over to use for fun stuff. Is that right?"

Dad nodded, looking delighted to see his kids' math

skills hard at work. Lucy gingerly poked a piece of shriveled lettuce with the toe of her shoe and muttered, “Dad . . . do you actually think this trip is going to get off the ground? Or is this just another one of your big ideas that’s going to fizzle in a few days?”

Herb’s head swiveled from his sister to his dad, waiting for their dad’s answer. Freddy, however, was nowhere to be seen. Herb had noticed that his brother often disappeared when they talked about Mom, or when Lucy and Dad started bickering.

In Lucy’s defense, Dad *had* come up with lots of ideas that had gone all wrong over the past few years. But maybe that was because Mom had been the fun, adventurous one and, well . . . Dad was great, too, but in a different way. After Mom died, Dad had talked about planning family trips to some of Mom’s favorite places—the Icehotel in Sweden, the Black Hills, Scotland, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness—but they hadn’t happened yet. Then there was the skydiving trip for four that Dad had paid for, in full, before he realized he was the only one old enough to actually jump out of a plane (and Dad was scared of heights)—so that idea was a bust, too. Herb still got sad whenever he thought about the cat, Cream, they’d adopted before realizing Freddy was allergic.

Dad cleared his throat. Patches of bright pink

suddenly colored his pale cheeks. “Here’s the thing,” he began, his voice soft. “Many years ago, your mother and I used to plan for and dream about all of the nutty things we might someday do with our lives. When I was younger, I dreamed of writing short stories or dabbling in the arts. I took a sculpting class in college, you know?”

Freddy poked his head out from under the counter where he’d been hiding. “*You* took an art class?”

“Indeed.” Dad nodded. “But once we started grad school and teaching, and got wrapped up in our research,” he said, running a shaking hand through his wispy hair, “there wasn’t time for that kind of nonsense anymore. Your mom continued to talk about those someday dreams—her hope of eventually sailing around the world, and exploring hidden cities in Europe. She longed to open a small inn, where she could get to know adventurous travelers from near and far. In the year before she died, she talked often about how much she would love to run a food truck as a family.” Dad propped his foot up on the truck’s giant back bumper. “She thought it would be something fun we could do together. Mom loved that a food truck offered the best parts of so many adventures: a chance to meet new people, travel, and experience the thrill of building something from the ground up.”

Herb wished he could remember his mom talking about this kind of stuff, but the truth was, he couldn't. Then, all of a sudden, he remembered playing with an old plastic food truck with his mom. They'd set up tiny plastic food on the counters and use his collection of LEGO people as customers. They'd called the game Restaurant, and sometimes Mom would hide real treats inside the food truck for Herb to find—chocolate chips, silver and gold Hershey's Kisses, a handwritten note wrapped around a piece of hard candy.

Dad's voice broke into Herb's memory. "Way back when, your mom put all her big ideas on hold so I could pursue my career," he said. "I always promised her we would do some of those crazy things later." He didn't say it, but even Herb knew they were all thinking the same thing: there had been no *later* for Mom.

"Getting all this money from one of Mom's big ideas . . . well, it feels like a sign," Dad said with a shrug. "It's like Mom is telling me it's time to go for it."

Herb didn't remember as much about their mom as Freddy or Lucy did. He had just turned six when she died. One of his favorite memories was from a regular day when she'd brought him to the park, just the two of them. He'd been nervous to go down the biggest slide;



it was tall and steep, and there was a mound of scratchy sand at the bottom of the plastic chute. But Mom had convinced him to try it. When he got all the way up to the top, he'd leaned down to see if she was watching. The wind was blowing her big, soft, fluffy hair all around, and Herb had giggled because it looked like a tumbleweed. She'd given him a thumbs-up and a big, confident smile, and said, "Go for it, Herbie." Herb liked the idea of this food truck being some kind of sign, and he liked thinking about his mom telling them to *go for it*. "Then let's go for it," he whispered. "It can be our very own family experiment, for Mom. She always loved experimenting."

Freddy crawled out from under the counter and crept closer to Dad, who was still standing alone outside the back door. "*The Great Peach Experiment*," Freddy added with a little smile. "For Mom." He nodded and whacked one of the counters with his fist. Then he got right down to business. "So, Dad . . . you're saying we're actually going to be *running* this food truck? What kind of food are we going to be selling?"

"Aha!" Dad hopped up to join the kids inside the truck. It suddenly felt quite squished with all four of them squeezed in together. And Dad had to stand slightly stooped; if he stretched up to his full height, his balding head scraped the ceiling. "I thought that could be our first order of business as a family. We need

to pick a theme for our truck. Something catchy. And uniquely *Peach*.”

“You’re telling me you bought a food truck and are planning to start up a business with it, but you don’t know what *kind* of food we’re selling? And this is a good idea *how*?” Lucy asked. Herb caught his sister rolling her eyes. She muttered, “Maybe we should sell peaches?”

“Or peaches-and-cream ice cream!” Herb hoped the idea of ice cream might cheer his sister up. “And other ice cream and malts and stuff? Mom liked ice cream.” He closed his eyes, trying to remember her favorite flavor, but he couldn’t.

Lucy grinned at him. “Do you guys remember, her favorite flavor was Superman?” she asked, as if she’d read Herb’s mind. “Just like you, Herbie. Mom liked that it turned her tongue all kinds of funny colors.”

Herb giggled. “I like that, too.”

“I like your spirit, Herb,” Dad said. “An ice cream truck is a nice idea, but we have this fancy, nearly new, multichambered oven and a stove in the truck. Seems like we should use them somehow.”

“Monster cookies!” Freddy suggested. “Or tacos. Maybe both! Everyone likes tacos and cookies.”

“I *do* like cookies and tacos,” Dad said. He scratched his bald spot, which was surrounded by fluffy puffs of blond hair. “Hmmm.”

“Or . . . ,” said Lucy, “maybe we should pick a food we already know how to make and go with that?”

Herb shrugged. “But what do we know how to make?” Most nights, Lucy made him and Freddy grilled cheese or omelets or butter noodles or smoothies or soup for dinner. They were all yummy, but none of those items seemed special enough for a food truck.

There was a long silence, during which Dad swung a cabinet door back and forth, back and forth. It squeaked and sighed, filling the silence. No one said anything. Finally, Dad blurted out: “What about Aunt Lucinda’s wonderful peach pie? I haven’t made it in years, but she did teach me how to make it. It was your mom’s favorite.” He furrowed his brow and added quietly, “At least, she always told *Lucinda* it was her favorite . . .”

“Peach pie,” Freddy said, smiling. “That’s catchy.”

“Catchy,” echoed Herb.

Lucy shook her head, but then she muttered, “I guess it’s settled, then.”

“The Peach Pie Truck,” Herb cheered. “Yum yum.”

Just as Herb said that, the cabinet door Dad had been swinging back and forth popped off its hinges and clattered to the floor. In the silence that followed, Dad gave his kids a forced smile and said, “This summer is going to be great!”

From the Sketchbook of Freddy Peach:

HOW TO SPEND A MILLION DOLLARS

When I have a million bucks of my own, I'm going to buy a limo and hire a private driver to drive me to school every day. It'll have lasers, a private soda dispenser, a hot tub in the back, and probably even a butler!

