

Ray, reflected

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Ghost Road Press

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday: Eight Days Left

I'm not sure how things got so crazy, but I think it all started with me trying to find my yellow flip-flop with the green stripe. We had a week left before middle school started, and I was hoping to accomplish a few things before I became a seventh grader:

1. Spread peanut butter on my little sister's face and call the dog to lick it off.
2. Beat Sam at Madden at least once.
3. Manage to say more than "hey" to Florence.
4. Read every single Captain Underpants book.
5. Catch one good wave at Steamer Lane without wiping out.

The funny thing about summer is that you make

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all these plans in May. You look out the window of your classroom, smell freedom on the breeze that's blowing your teacher's papers off her desk, and promise yourself you won't waste it this time pulling weeds and watching YouTube. Then it's August, you know the lines to every video, and you realize you've let another season of fun get away from you. Well, at least that's what seems to happen to me.

I wrote that list when I was supposed to be taking notes in my cooperative group. It was two days before summer vacation, and the city we'd built from toilet paper rolls and video game boxes had been wiped out that morning when Tyler Schroeder told Boogs he had a spider on his shoulder. Boogs had been putting the final touches on his building—a rec center complete with a swimming pool on the roof. We'd told him not to use real liquid, but he insisted, and was pouring water from his squirt bottle into the plastic bowl he was using as a pool. But Boogs is so scared of spiders, you can't say tarantula without him getting a bad case of nervous farts, and he freaked out. Next thing we knew, the Potter Memorial Pool was flying through our miniature city, soaking everything. Tyler started laughing, and making jokes about Hurricane Boogs. Then he walked away, leaving the three of us staring in shock at the soggy mess. Ms. Rooms walked in a few minutes later. I

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realized we were still just standing there, staring at our ruined village. She just shook her head, and told us to take our seats.

So at recess, she made our team stay inside and come up with a solution to our problem. I was the notetaker, so I had to write down the ideas as they came up.

“I know, why don’t we stay after school and redo it?” said Boogs, taking a swipe at his nose.

“I have soccer, Ray has religious school,” Sam said. “You should have to fix it yourself, Boogs! We told you not to put water in it.”

“It’s not my fault! Tyler said I had a spider on my shoulder!”

“Dude, but the water! The WATER!”

So while Boogs and Sam argued, I started the list of things I wanted to do over the summer. You look at it, and it doesn’t seem very ambitious, right? Well, by the end of August, item number four was the only one I’d been able to complete, and that was because it was Boogs’ collection, and he’d wanted them back.

Oh, and I solved our city problem, by the way. The next day, when we had to present our work to the class, the name of our city was no longer Radsville. It was “The Lost City of Atlantis.” It was also the last day of school, so I think that’s why Ms. Rooms laughed and gave us full credit for our work.

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So I was a week away from seventh grade, and I couldn't find my yellow flip-flop with the green stripe. Steamer Lane is a great place to surf, but I have to walk, like, half a mile on the hottest sidewalk in the northern hemisphere to get there. It's weird, because Santa Cruz is not exactly warm in the summer. Every morning, the fog comes in thick and cool. It burns off around lunchtime, and then the sun stays out until late in the evening. But for some reason, this one sidewalk between my house and Steamers is foot-burning hot at all hours of the day. It'll be the rainiest January in history, and that stretch of cement will be steaming off the rain as it splashes down. It's a Santa Cruz mystery, that's for sure.

I go through about four pair of flops every summer, because they start to melt after awhile.

But that's not what happened to the yellow one with the green stripe. It was just gone. I knew I didn't lose it, because I always put the flops in the same place when I get back from surfing—under my board in the garage. I always place my stick carefully in the rack on the wall (under my Dad's longboard), and slip my flops off underneath. Always.

I knew Eggers hadn't eaten it, because I'm the only one whose job it is to clean the dog run every week. I always find remnants of stuff he got into when I'm scraping up—rubber bands, pencil

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erasers, memory cards (all the info saved on them is lost somewhere in Eggers's digestive system). If he'd gone momo on my sandals, I'd have found little chunks of green stripes mixed in with his leavings. Or better yet, puked up on my pillow. Yeah, Eggers is pretty disgusting. He's, like, a million years old, and doesn't get around too quickly.

The weird thing was that only one of the shoes had gone missing. I mean, if I'd put them in a different place, then they'd both be gone, right? But there was my left yellow flip-flop with the green stripe under my board.

"Dude, go commando," Sam told me. "Tide change is in 18 minutes. We gotta go." He was standing in my driveway, hopping back and forth and squawking like a seagull with athlete's foot.

"What? No way!" I answered. Like I was going to brave the Sidewalk of Doom in my bare feet.

"Dude." That's all he said. He picked up his surfboard off my lawn and gave me a frustrated look.

"Fine. But if I burn the skin off my feet, it'll be your fault." I grabbed my board and we ran for Steamer Lane.

Steamers is where the best locals go. There are a ton of good breaks along Monterey Bay—when I surf with my dad, he takes me to Paradise Beach, down near Capitola. We never go to 10 Mile Beach,

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which is up the coast, because my dad says surfing north of the bay is too dangerous and way too cold.

But the biggest waves break at Steamers. The other thing that makes Steamer Lane sketchy is that you catch your ride by some gnarly rocks that jut out from the point. So you have to hop your wave, then scoot along it as fast as you can to get past the boulders. Then it's smooth surfing. They hold the Cold Water Classic there every year.

So I'd been planning on graduating to Steamer Lane this summer. I wanted to catch just one killer wave before school started. I wanted to have it under my belt when middle school started. You know, proof that I was cool. Or at least cool enough. The problem was that my folks weren't too psyched about it.

My dad made me promise I'd wait and go with him.

But it was already the Sunday before school was starting, and my Dad had to work. I was running low on opportunities to cross it off my list. When Sam said we should just go surf Steamers, and not tell my father, I wasn't too sure about it. But when your best friend puts the pressure on you, it's hard to wimp out, you know?

The sidewalk of Hades was hotter than ever. I thought maybe it was a sign or something. Like the surfing gods were saying, "Ray dude, you made

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your dad a promise. That's why I hid your flip-flop. That's why the sidewalk is so hot. Go to Cowell's instead!" I tried walking in the shade of the little picket fence that ran along the walk, but it didn't help. Finally, I hopped the fence and walked in the cool grass of the houses on West Cliff Drive. I had to scramble over the occasional hedge between yards, but it was worth it to save the soles of my feet from burning off and sticking to the sidewalk.

Sam was talking about his little sisters—twins—and their latest bizarro psychic feat.

"I go to wake up Ruthie, and she asks me if I've ever been in the basement of the Coconut Grove. Weird, huh? So I say, 'Yeah, once on a dare, but it was too dark to see much of anything.' She pops out of bed, and we walk down the hall to Leslie's room. Leslie takes awhile to wake up, but finally rubs the sleep out of her eyes, and says, 'I had a weird dream last night.' Ruthie's like, 'Me, too! Let me tell you about it.' So we're sitting on the bed, and Ruthie goes, 'We were in the Coconut Grove, playing Crazy Taxi when—'and Leslie interrupts her, and goes, 'No, it was Bike Messenger.' And Ruthie says, 'Oh, that's right, it was Bike Messenger. But the power went out on all the games, and we had to go down to the basement to find the fuse box.' And Leslie says, 'Because Hayden told us that's how to fix the games.' And Ruthie says, "Yeah. I forgot

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about that part. So we get the door open, but it's really dark—”

I stopped walking. Sam took a couple more steps, and realized I wasn't across the fence from him anymore. He walked back to me.

“What?”

“Dude,” I said, “I'm kind of confused. So Ruthie's telling you about this dream she had and Leslie's correcting her?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, grinning. “They had the exact same dream and told the story of it together. They didn't even realize how weird it was. The hair on the back of my neck was standing straight up, but I just sat there and nodded as they told me about it. They're only in third grade—they think dreams are like TV shows. You know, everyone sees pretty much the same thing.”

I stood there for a second, shook my head, and laughed. “Sam, your family is wiggin.” Then we started walking again. ¹

I was so caught up in Sam's story, that I had no idea I was walking through Florence's front yard until it was too late.

I'd hurdled the hedge, swinging my surfboard

¹ This is a footnote. Footnotes might give more details about the story, tell a secret, or just sit there. You don't have to read all the footnotes to enjoy the book, but you might miss something really cool, or funny, or stupid. Like right now. This is a footnote about footnotes. Which is pretty dumb, if you ask me.

behind me, and was about to ask Sam a question when my foot got caught on something.²

Wait a second. Hit “pause,” then fast-forward to the next day, when Sam and Boogs and I are sitting on Boogs’s back patio, drinking cans of Coke before going inside to play that fateful game of Madden. Sam is telling Boogs what happened in Florence’s front yard. At the end, Boogs sprays carbonated beverage out his nose at supersonic speed:

“Mr. Cool Surfer Dude here doesn’t have shoes on, so he’s walking the grass instead of Hades. He’s hopping the hedge into Florence’s yard, and looks up to see her watering the geraniums or something. He acts all cool, and swings his surfboard behind him.³ But he catches his big toe under the hose, and between that and the wet grass, his feet decide to take a vacation from the ground.”

By now, Boogs is snickering, but he has no idea what he’s in for. He recklessly moves the can to his mouth, to chug down the last of the drink.

“So Ray goes butt over teakettle, but not before the hose catches on his leg, and is yanked out of Florence’s hand. His board takes a little trip to the other side of the yard, Ray man lands on his patootie, and the hose flings around, drenching everything in

² It was a garden hose. Who uses garden hoses anymore? That’s what sprinkler systems are for!

³ Okay. I did NOT see her there until I was on my back. I was not trying to act cool.

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sight. Including Florence. She gives off a little yelp, like a wiener dog in a washing machine, and smooth Ray just lies there, looking at the sky, stunned.”

Boogs puts up his right hand for Sam to stop. His left hand is over his mouth, as he tries to swallow down his Coke without choking.

“It gets better... Florence’s very own real-life wiener dog gets into the act, and starts chasing the hose, barking and growling at it. But the hose fights back, and the dog gets a little conk in the head from the nozzle. Now he yelps, jumps back and lands on, wait for it, Ray. Right where it counts. Now Ray sounds like a wiener dog in a washing machine.”

Boogs sprays his drink out his nose and mouth. Luckily we both see it coming, and back off before he blows.

Okay, now rewind back to me in Florence’s front yard, yelping like, well, you get the idea.

Sam’s a good storyteller. He can make the most boring event sound amazing. When I finally stopped rolling around on the grass, the hose had been turned off, the dog was in the house, and Florence was gone. Only her dad, standing on the front porch, remained to witness my shameful exit. He was laughing.

“Pearlman.” he said, “Thanks for the performance.” I picked up my board, raised my hand in a half wave, and took to the burning sidewalk.

I was in no mood to attempt Steamers. I was

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wet, sore and humiliated. Sam did his best to cover up his smile, but I could hear a little snort here and there as we walked on in silence.

See, the thing is that I've had a crush on Florence since third grade. She's beautiful and smart, and everybody likes her. Her dad is Hawaiian, her mom is Mexican-American, and she has the most amazing chocolate brown eyes, hazelnut skin and midnight black hair. I've studied her for years. She has delicate hands with long fingers. She wears pink nail polish on her toes. She always smells of the same flowery perfume. And I always lose it whenever I have a chance to impress her.

I walk by her house almost every day, and somehow, if she's anywhere in sight, something goes wrong. Like when I was in fourth grade, and I was heading home from school. I was looking down at the seams of the sidewalk, trying to put one foot in each frame. Have you ever done that? It's like a game—one foot per sidewalk panel. But I've never been very tall, and in fourth grade, the only way I could take a single step with each square was if I got some speed going, and was running and jumping from square to square. So my head's down, because I'm concentrating on the sidewalk, and I'm picking up speed, one step, one square, when BAM! I'm on my back on the concrete, with a headache the size of Kentucky. I open my eyes, and there's Florence's

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mailbox above me. Then Florence's pretty face is looking down at me, and I can see her lips move, but can't make out what she's saying. She repeats herself.

"Are you alright?" I touch the crown of my head, but there's no blood or anything there. She helps me to my feet, which almost distracts me from the shooting pain in my cranium. Then I hear her dad's voice.

"Whew, Pearlman! You got yourself some bucket of bolts—look what you did to my mailbox!" He's standing there, pointing to this giant dent in the side of it. "I heard you smack into that thing from the garage!" He grins, shakes his head. "You okay?"

I look from Florence to him to Florence again, nod a little, and slump off toward home.

So, you can tell I haven't had a lot of luck showing up on Florence's radar as anything more than that goofy kid who's always hurting himself in front of her house.

Sam walked and I limped to the parking lot at Steamer Lane. The National Surfing Museum is in the little lighthouse that sits on the point. We climbed over the guardrail, and walked to the edge of the cliff, to see how the waves were breaking. They weren't. The ocean was like a huge bowl of green pudding. It looked thick and still, like it was jiggling instead of flowing. Every once in awhile,

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a sea lion would swim by, stick his head out of the water, snuff around, and dive silently back under the surface. There were no sounds—not even the seagulls made any noise. A couple old hippy guys were lying on their boards, skimming slowly over the water, but they couldn't find even the smallest wave to ride.

Sam made a disgusted sound. “Poopsickles,” he said. I kind of shrugged. I was actually pretty relieved to not disobey my dad. Sam flicked me on the ear, and we turned back. This time, I stuck to the gutter next to the sidewalk.

When I walked up the driveway to my house, I could hear the phone ringing inside. Sam gave me a half-wave as he kept walking, and I dropped my board on the lawn and ran through the front door. I was kind of out of breath when I picked up the phone.

“So we got a new kitten,” the voice said, without even a hello.

“Hey Jim! How's San Jose?” I answered. ⁴

“So we got this kitten from the pound. It's black and fuzzy, and squeaks instead of meowing.”

“Okay. What'd you name it?” I asked, trying to be conversational.

“But it has kennel cough,” Jim said, as if I hadn't

⁴ Jim moved over the summer. He and Sam and Boogs and I used to hang out together. Now, whenever he calls, he tells me a disgusting story about one of his pets.

just asked him a question. “Which means it’s full of snot, and coughs and sneezes all the time.”

“Yuck, dude, that’s—“

“That’s not the problem. The problem is Weasley.”

“Oh no, is he okay?”⁵

“Dude. He got kennel cough from the little poopy cat. So now he’s blowing mucus bubbles all over the house.”

“That’s pretty sick, man.” I was starting to worry about where this story was going.

“So you know how Weasley always crawls on my bed at, like, three in the morning? And he meows until I lift up my covers and let him curl up next to me?”

“Oh no,” I whispered.

“Yeah. So Weasley is on my chest. I can feel him there, but I’m still pretty much asleep. But instead of meowing, you know what he does?”

“I’m not sure I want to know, Bocks.”

“He sneezes up boogs all over my face. He gives off this little sneeze, and sprays my whole sound asleep mug with cat slime.”

“Oh man!”

“Dude, I had my mouth open!”

I started laughing. I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t funny—I mean, I wouldn’t laugh if some pet sneezed

⁵ Weasely is Jim’s personal pet cat. He’s the coolest animal I’ve ever met.

into my mouth and all over my face, but... well... it happened to Jim, not me, so it was hilarious.

Jim said something I couldn't hear, but I couldn't stop laughing long enough to say, "What?" It came out more like, "Wha? Wha?"

"Wa wa? What the heck is wa wa?" I couldn't tell if he was frustrated, or just giving me a hard time. "Okay dude, that's all I had to say. Gotta go. Have a good last week of summer break."

"Jim!"

"Lates." And then he was gone. He does that all the time, calls to tell me a story, then hangs up before I can find out how his new house is, if he's making friends, what his new school is going to be like. I think he avoids talking about that stuff because he really didn't want to move away. San Jose is only forty-five minutes by car from Santa Cruz, but it's forever when you can't drive yourself.