1

WORLD RECORDS

CHECK THIS OUT. This guy named Andrew Dahl holds the world record for blowing up the most balloons . . . with his nose. Yeah. That's true. Not sure how he found out that was some kinda special talent, and I can't even imagine how much snot be in those balloons, but hey, it's a thing and Andrew's the best at it. There's also this lady named Charlotte Lee who holds the record for owning the most rubber ducks. No lie. Here's what's weird about that: Why would you even want one rubber duck, let alone 5,631? I mean, *come on*. And me, well, I probably hold the world record for knowing about the most world records. That, and for eating the most sunflower seeds.

"Let me guess, sunflower seeds," Mr Charles practically shouts from behind the counter of what he calls his "country store," even though we live in a city. Mr Charles, who, by the way, looks just like James Brown if James Brown were white, has been ringing me up for sunflower seeds five days a week for about, let me think . . . since fourth grade, which is when Ma took the hospital job. So for about three years now. He's also hard of hearing, which when my mum used to say this, I always thought she was saying "harder hearing," which made no sense at all to me. I don't know why she just didn't say "almost deaf." Maybe because "hard of hearing" is more like hospital talk, which was probably rubbing off on her. But, yeah, Mr Charles can barely hear a thing, which is why he's always yelling at everybody and everybody's always yelling at him. His store is a straight-up scream fest, not to mention the extra sound effects from the loud TV he keeps behind the counter – cowboy movies on repeat. Mr Charles is also the guy who gave me this book, *Guinness World Records*, which is where I found out about Andrew Dahl and Charlotte Lee. He tells me I can set a record one day. A real record. Be one of the world's greatest somethings. Maybe. But I know one thing, Mr Charles has to hold the record for saying, *Let me guess, sunflower seeds*, because he says that every single time I come in, which means I probably also already hold the record for responding, loudly, the exact same way.

"Let me guess, one dollar." That's my comeback. Said it a gazillion times. Then I slap a coin in the palm of his wrinkly hand, and he puts the bag of seeds in mine.

After that, I continue on my slow-motion journey, pausing again only when I get to the bus stop. But this bus stop isn't just any bus stop. It's the one that's directly across the street from the gym. I just sit there with the other people waiting for the bus, except I'm never actually waiting for it. The bus gets you home fast, and I don't want that. I just go there to look at the people working out. See, the gym across the street has this big window – like the whole wall is a window – and they have those machines that make you feel like you walking up steps and so everybody just be facing the bus stop, looking all crazy like they're about to pass out. And trust me, there isn't anything funnier than that. So I check that out for a little while like it's some kind of movie: *The About to Pass Out Show*, starring stair-stepper person one through ten. I know this all probably sounds kind of weird, maybe even creepy, but it's something to do when you're bored. Best part about sitting there is tearing into my sunflower seeds like they're theatre popcorn.

About the sunflower seeds. I used to just put a whole bunch of them in my mouth at the same time, suck all the salt off, then spit them all out machine-gun-style. I could've probably set a world record in that, too. But now, I've matured. Now I take my time, moving them around, positioning them for the perfect bite to pop open the shell, then carefully separating the seed from it with my tongue, then – and this is the hard part – keeping the little seed safe in the space between my teeth and tongue, I spit the shells out. And finally, after all that, I chew the seed up. I'm like a master at it, even though, honestly, sunflower seeds don't taste like nothing. I'm not even sure they're really worth all the hassle. But I like the process anyway.

My dad used to eat sunflower seeds too. That's where I get it from. But he used to chew the whole thing up. The shells, the seeds, everything. Just devour them like some kind of beast. When I was really young, I used to ask him if a sunflower was going to grow inside of him since he ate the seeds so much. He was always watching some kind of game, like football or basketball, and he'd turn to me just for a second, just long enough to not miss a play, and say, "Sunflowers are all up in me, kid." Then he'd shake up the seeds in his palm like dice, before throwing another bunch in his mouth to chomp down on.

But let me tell you, my dad was lying. Wasn't no sunflowers growing in him. Couldn't have been. I don't know a whole lot about sunflowers, but I know they're pretty and girls like them, and I know the word sunflower is made up of two good words, and that man hasn't got two good words in him, or anything that any girl would like, because girls don't like men who try to shoot them and their son. And that's the kind of man he was.

It was three years ago when my dad lost it. When the alcohol made him meaner than he'd ever been. Every other night he would become a different person, like he'd morph into someone crazy, but this one night my mother decided to finally fight back. This one night everything went worse. I had my head sandwiched between the mattress and my pillow, something I got used to doing whenever they were going at it, when my mum crashed into my bedroom.

"We gotta go," she said, pulling the covers off the bed. And when I didn't move fast enough, she yelled, "Come on!"

Next thing I knew, she was dragging me down the hallway, my feet tripping over themselves. And that's when I looked back and saw him, my dad, staggering from the bedroom, his lips bloody, a pistol in his hand.

"Don't make me do this, Terri!" he angry begged, but me and my mum kept rolling. The sound of the gun cocking. The sound of the door unlocking. As soon as she swung the door open, my dad fired a shot. He was shooting at us! My dad! My dad was actually shooting . . . at . . . US! His wife and his boy! I didn't look to see what he hit, mainly because I was scared it was gonna be me. Or Ma. The sound was big, and sharp enough to make me feel like my brain was gonna pop in my head, enough to make my heart hiccup. But the craziest thing was, I felt like the shot – loudest sound I ever heard – made my legs move even faster. I don't know if that's possible, but that's definitely what it seemed like.

My mum and I kept running, down the staircase into the street, breaking into the darkness with death chasing behind us. We ran and ran and ran, until finally we came up on Mr Charles's store, which, luckily for us, stays open 24/7. Mr Charles took one look at me and my mum, out of breath, crying, barefoot in our pyjamas, and hid us in his storage room while he called the cops. We stayed there all night.

I haven't seen my dad since. Ma said the police said that when they got to the house, he was sitting outside on the steps, shirtless, with the pistol beside him, guzzling beer, eating sunflower seeds, waiting. Like he wanted to get caught. Like it was no big deal. They gave him ten years in prison, and to be honest, I don't know if I'm happy about that or not. Sometimes, I wish he'd got forever in jail. Other times, I wish he was home on the couch, watching the game, shaking seeds in his hand. Either way, one thing is for sure: that was the night I learned how to run. So when I was done sitting at the bus stop in front of the gym, and came across all those kids on the track at the park, practising, I had to go see what was going on, because running isn't anything I ever had to practise. It's just something I knew how to do.