MARSTON ST.

Water Bogey Bears

THIS STORY was going to begin like all the best stories. With a school bus falling from the sky.

But no one saw it happen. No one heard anything. So instead, this story will begin like all the … good ones.

With bogies.

"If you don't get all them nasty, half-baked goblins out your nose, I promise I'm not walking home with you. I'm not playin'."

Jasmine Jordan said this like she said most things—with her whole body. Like the words weren't just coming out of her mouth but were also rolling down her spine. She said it like she meant it.

Said it with the same *don't play with me* tone her mother used whenever she was trying to talk to Jasmine about something important for her "real life," and Jasmine turned the music up in her ears real loud to drown her mother out, and scroll on, scroll on. *If you don't take them earbugs … earbuds … airphones, or whatever they called out of your coconut head it's gonna be me turning up the volume and the bass, and I'm not talking about no music.*

That tone.

Jasmine's bogey-removal warning was aimed at her stuffy-nosed best friend, Terrence Jumper. TJ. Well, Jasmine called him her "best friend who's a boy," but she didn't have best friends who were girls, so TJ was her *best friend* best friend. And she was his. Been like that for a long time. Since he moved onto Marston Street, three houses down from her. Since the only way their mothers would let them be walkers was if they walked together because they were the only kids who lived on their block. Since six years, so since forever.

The bell rang, and Jasmine and TJ had just left their last class for the day, the only class they had together. Life science with Mr. Fantana.

"You been back to school for two days and you already starting with me?" TJ spun the black lock dial confidently, like he could feel the difference in the grooves and would know when he landed on the right numbers.

"How could I not? Look at them things. Honestly, TJ, I don't even know how you're breathing right now," Jasmine continued. Their lockers were right next to each other, luckily, because Jasmine, unlike TJ, turned her lock with an intense concentration, glaring at it as if the combination could up and change at any second, or as if her fingers might stop working at any moment. And if for some strange reason either of those things happened, at least she knew TJ was right there to help.

TJ shrugged, tossing his science book onto the floor of the metal closet, the smell of feet wafting up from it like a cloud of dust, unsettled. And unsettling. The floor of his locker was littered with empty snack bags that Jasmine had slid through the door vent between classes over the last two days. Trash … yes. But Jasmine and TJ called them "friendship flags." The litter of love. And because Jasmine had been gone for a while, they were basically notes that said *I've missed you*. In Cheeto dust.

Then, finally, with the hardened snot like tiny stones rolled in front of the entrances of his nose, TJ turned the bottom of his shirt up and mopped it. A streak of slime smeared across his lip as he swiped and pinched and dug just enough for it to count as a dig, but not enough for it to count as *diggin'*.

TJ tilted his face upward so Jasmine could get a clear line of sight into his nostrils. *"Better?"* he asked, half sincere, half hoping there was one more bogey left and that it was somehow making a mean face at Jasmine.

Jasmine stared into TJ's nose like she was peering through a brown microscope of flesh, and she did this totally unfazed by the fact that TJ had just used his T-shirt—the one he was *wearing*—as a tissue. And why *would* she be bothered? Not that it wasn't disgusting (it was), but she'd known him a long time. Had seen him do things that made bogies on the bottom of a T-shirt seem like nothing more than added decoration. Bogey bedazzle. A little flavour for his fashion. Had seen him use his fingers to pick gum off the bottom of his sneakers (and hers), and of course nothing would ever beat the time he clapped a mosquito dead right when it had bitten him, then licked the fly slime off his arm.

That one Jasmine had dared him to do. Paid him a dollar for it. Worth it, for both of them.

"Y'know, I can see straight through to your brain," Jasmine said, pretending to still be examining. "And it turns out, there's a whole lot of it missing." She plucked TJ's nose. "Sike, sike, sike, sike. Nah, you good. I guess I can be seen with you now."

"Whatever." Locker slam. "I mean, we all bogies anyway."

"*You* might be a bogey." Locker slam. "But me, I'm no bogey."

"That's what you think," TJ went on as they swapped backpacks. His was light. Jasmine's was packed with every class's textbook and all the world's notebooks. Makeup work. She could've carried it herself, but TJ was concerned about her back, about her muscles, because she was still recovering from the attack.

They headed down the crowded corridor, noisy with shoe squeaks and thick with end-of-day stink. "See, I've been thinking about this. Bogies aren't anything but water mixed with, like, dust and particles in the air and stuff like that—"

"How you know?" Jasmine interrupted. Knowing TJ, he could've heard this anywhere, like from Cynthia Sower—everybody called her Say-So— who jokes 99.99999 percent of the time.

"Looked it up online once," TJ explained. "Was trying to figure out why they so salty."

"Wait." Jasmine thrust a hand up, as if walling off the rest of TJ's words. "You *eat* them?"

"Come on, Jasmine. It isn't fair to hold my past against me. Dang." TJ shook his head. "Now, if you done interrupting, let me continue with my hypothesis." He broke "hypothesis" down into four fragmented words to put some spice on it. *High-Poth-Uh-Sis.* "So, bogies are basically water and dust." He put a finger in the air. "And human beings are mostly water, right? Isn't that what Fantana said at the beginning of the year?"

"Right."

"Okay, follow me. Every Sunday when we be at church, they always be talking about how God made us out of dust, right?" TJ and Jasmine went to the same church, where they sang in the youth choir together. TJ always asked Mrs. Bronson, the choir director, to let him sing solos even though his voice was all over the place.

A set of wind chimes in a hurricane. And Jasmine's singing wasn't much better. Only difference was she knew it and would never think to ask for a solo. She loved to wear the "graduation" robes and harmonise and sway and clap, snuggling her voice into the others like drawer into dressing table. Her mother always told her, *Holding a note is talent enough.*

Even though TJ couldn't hold a note—that definitely wasn't his talent—he could hold a conversation. So he continued. "God making man from dust and blowing breath into his nostrils and all that, right?"

"I … guess."

"You think God's breath stank?" "What?"

"Never mind. Probably not." TJ got himself back on track. "So, if God made man from dust, and now, for some reason, man—"

"And woman," Jasmine tacked on.
"Yeah, and woman … consist of mostly water, then basically, we water *and* dust, right?" TJ was waving his hands around like he was drawing some grand equation on an invisible board. Jasmine didn't say nothing, and she didn't need to for TJ to bring his theory home. "Which means … ," TJ concluded, and Jasmine could practically see the drumroll behind his eyes, "we all basically … bogies."
TJ wore satisfaction on his face like good lotion, and Jasmine wore confusion on hers like she'd been slapped with a gluey palm.
"Wrong," she clapped back.
"You don't gotta believe me," TJ said, holding the door for Jasmine as they finally made it out of the building.
"Oh, I don't."
"You don't have to," TJ repeated. "But that don't mean it isn't true. See, no matter what you think I be doing in school, I really be learning. And seriously, I need to start teaching because while all these so-called scientists and teachers like Mr. Fantana be busy trying to figure out if aliens are real, I've already figured out that bogies are like … the babiest form of babies!"
This made Jasmine spit air. See, even though TJ was ridiculous and annoying and sometimes gross, she appreciated the fact that he always made her laugh whether she wanted to or not. Whether he was trying to or not. He was always there to chip some of the hard off. Tear at the toughness Jasmine had built up over the school year.
It had been a rough one for her.