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Also by Rebecca Stead

When You Reach Me



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For Randi

The Science Unit of Destiny

There's this totally false map of the human tongue. It's supposed to show where we taste different things, like salty on the side of the tongue, sweet in the front, bitter in the back. Some guy drew it a hundred years ago, and people have been forcing kids to memorize it ever since.

But it's wrong—*all* wrong. As in, not even the slightest bit right. It turns out that our taste buds are all alike, they can taste everything, and they're all over the place. Mr. Landau, seventh-grade science teacher, has unrolled a beaten-up poster of the ignorant tongue map, and he's explaining about how people have misunderstood the science of taste since the beginning of time.

Everyone in my class, even Bob English Who Draws, is paying attention today, because this is the first day of "How We Taste," also known as The Science Unit of Destiny. They all believe that sometime in the next ten school days, at least one person in the room is going to discover his or her own personal fate: true love or tragic death.

Yes, those are the only two choices.

* * *

Bob English Who Draws is really named Robert English. Back in fourth grade, our teacher, Ms. Diamatis, started calling him Bob English Who Draws because he was always zoning out and doodling with a superfine Sharpie. Ms. Diamatis would say, “Bob English Who Draws, can you please take us through the eights?” It was her job to make sure no one got out of fourth grade without lightning-fast multiplication skills. And everyone has called him that ever since.

While the rest of the class is hanging on every syllable that comes out of Mr. Landau’s mouth, I’m looking at the false tongue poster and I’m kind of wishing it *wasn’t* wrong. There’s something nice about those thick black arrows: sour here, salty there, like there’s a right place for everything. Instead of the total confusion the human tongue actually turns out to be.

People, People

It's Friday afternoon, last period. Gym. Ms. Warner and I have done our Friday high five. We do it every week, because I hate school and she hates work, and we both live for Friday.

We're playing volleyball, with an exclamation point. Ms. Warner has written it on the whiteboard outside the gym doors: *Volleyball!*

The combination of seeing that word and breathing the smell of the first floor, which is the smell of the cafeteria after lunch, creates some kind of echo in my head, like a faraway shout.

In the morning, the cafeteria smells fried and sweet, like fish sticks and cookies. But after lunch, it's different. There's more kid sweat and garbage mixed in, I guess. Or maybe it's just that, after lunch, the cafeteria doesn't have the smell of things to come. It's the smell of what has been.

Volleyball!

Ms. Warner is at the net with her hands on her knees,

calling stuff out to kids and smiling like crazy. “Shazam!” she yells when Eliza Donan gives the ball a halfhearted bump with her forearm. “Sweet shot!”

If you didn’t know Ms. Warner, you’d think there’s no place she’d rather be. Maybe she’s trying out my mom’s famous theory that if you smile for no reason at all you will actually start to feel happy. Mom’s always telling me to smile and hoping I’ll turn into a smiley person, which, to be honest, is kind of annoying. But I know she’s extra-sensitive about me ever since she and Dad made their big announcement that we had to sell our house. She even recorded a bunch of *America’s Funniest Home Videos* for me to watch: my smile therapy.

I tell Mom to please save her miracle cures for the hospital. She’s a nurse in the intensive-care ward, where she has to check on her patients every fifteen minutes. It’s a hard habit to break, I guess, all that checking. I’ve been watching the shows, though, and they do make me laugh. How can you not laugh at *America’s Funniest Home Videos*? All those wacky animals. All that falling down.

I count the number of rotations we have left in “Volleyball!” before it’s my serve and then glance at the huge clock in its protective cage on the wall. I calculate a fifty-fifty chance that the dismissal bell will save me, but the next thing I know I’m in that back corner, balancing the ball on one palm and getting ready to slap it with the other.

Don’t look at the ball.

Point your eyes where you want the ball to go.

But the advice in my head is useless, because time slows

down until everyone's voices transform into something that sounds like underwater whale-singing.

Well, obviously "underwater," I tell myself. Where else are you going to find whales?

I should be paying attention to the ball.

Just as I'm about to smack it, I get this feeling, this premonition, that I'm going to land the ball at least somewhere on the other side of the net, maybe even in that big hole in the second row where Mandy and Gabe are being careful not to stand too close because they secretly like each other.

I'm wrong, though. The ball goes high, falls short, and hits the floor between the feet of Dallas Llewellyn, who is standing right in front of me. My serve is what is called an epic fail, and some of the girls start doing the slow clap.

Clap.

Pause.

Clap.

Pause.

Clap.

It's sarcastic clapping. You know that famous philosophical question "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Well, I have no idea, but it has to be better than the slow clap.

Ms. Warner is yelling "People! People!" like she always does when kids are mean and she has no idea what to do about it.

Dallas hands me the ball for my second try and I hit it right away, just to get it over with. This time it goes way left, out of bounds. Then the bell rings, kids fly in all directions, and the week is over.

* * *

I stroll over to Ms. Warner, who's sitting on a stack of folded-up mats against the wall, making notes on her clipboard.

"Happy weekend, G!" she says. "We made it. Forty-eight hours of freedom and beauty, looking right at us."

Ms. Warner is trying to make the name G stick to me. My name is Georges, which is pronounced just like "George" because the S is silent, but of course some kids call me "Jor-Jess," or "Gorgeous." I don't much care. There are worse things to be called than Gorgeous, even for a boy.

"G? You in there?" Ms. Warner is waving one hand in front of my face. "I said happy weekend."

"Yeah," I say, but for once I don't want to think about the weekend, because we're moving out of our house on Sunday. Mom will be at the hospital, so I'm Dad's designated helper.

Ms. Warner is smiling at me. "Pop a squat," she says, patting the pile of gym mats. I lie down on the floor instead.

A few of the kids have decided to kick off their weekends by hurling volleyballs at the giant clock. They can't hurt it, because of the wire cage, but Ms. Warner still feels duty-bound to stop them. "Be right back," she tells me, and then she rushes off yelling "People! People!"

Lying down on the floor was a mistake. Lying down suggests I'm dying, and attracts vultures. Or if not dying, defeated. And if not vultures, Dallas Llewellyn.

Dallas is standing over me. Before I can blink, he's got one foot on my stomach. Just resting it there.

"Nice serve, Gorgeous."

This is classic bully crap. That's what Mom called it when she saw the things someone wrote on one of the dividers in my

notebook a few weeks ago. I would never have showed them to her, but she goes through my stuff sometimes. “Catching up,” she calls it.

Dallas’s sneaker is resting on the soft spot right below my solar plexus. It hurts. I do some shallow breathing, because I don’t want his heel to puncture any of my internal organs.

“We were losing anyway,” I tell him, though I have no idea whether that’s true.

“It was *tied*,” he snarls, and I try to shrug, which is hard to do when you’re lying on your back with someone’s foot in your gut. I want to tell him what I know, which is that the fate of the world doesn’t hang on whether a bunch of seventh graders win a game of volleyball in some really old school in Brooklyn that smells like a hundred years of lunch.

Instead, I wrap my hands around his ankle, and lift. I’ve been doing morning weights with Dad for about a year—just these little blue plastic ones that tuck under my parents’ bed, but there’s a cumulative effect. Dallas circles his arms uselessly and then hits the floor.

It’s a harmless bounce. I would never want to hurt him. I know that soon all of this will be a distant memory for both of us. But pain is pain, and I would rather avoid it.

A Boy Your Age

On Sunday morning I stand in the lobby of our apartment building, watching the movers come in and out. Dad says I'm holding the door, but the door is actually propped open with a scratched-up wooden triangle that reminds me of the blocks area in pre-K. What I'm really doing is looking down at that wedge of wood and thinking about how I used to make these super-long car ramps with Jason, and how Jason dresses like a skateboarder now, which he isn't, and how whenever Carter Dixon or Dallas Llewellyn calls me Gorgeous, Jason just stands there.

I lean past the lobby door so I can see up and down the empty sidewalk. It's super-bright out, and the trees make cool shadows on the pavement.

Dad's in the moving truck, making sure the furniture comes out in a certain order. I'm guessing he's being about as helpful as I am, standing guard over my wooden wedge.

I'm hearing a sound. It's a funny, high-pitched buzzing that I think maybe I've *been* hearing for a while, without noticing. There should be a word for that, when you hear something

and simultaneously realize that it's been swimming around in your brain for five minutes without your permission.

I glance around to see what's buzzing, first at the ancient yellow chandelier above my head, then at the shiny silver intercom on the wall. It's the kind with a keypad and a little camera that lets the people in their apartments see who's in the lobby before deciding whether to let them in. Dad has already shown me how the whole thing works.

I take a step toward the intercom, and the buzzing stops.

I go back to thinking about Jason, who was my every-day-after-school friend until the end of sixth grade, when he went to sleepaway camp for seven weeks and then started sitting at the cool table in September like he'd been there all along.

All of a sudden there's a whole lot of noise coming from somewhere right above me, a weird mix of rattling, clicking, and pounding that echoes around the tiled lobby, and then two dogs appear on the landing at the top of the stairs, a giant yellow one and a small dark one. There's a boy about my size behind the dogs, holding the twisted leashes in one hand and trying to keep a grip on the banister with the other.

I flatten myself against the open door, thinking the dogs will pull the boy past me and out the front, but they don't. Instead, they drag him almost in a circle, to a door underneath the stairs. They make the turn so fast that he actually hops on one leg for a few seconds, almost tipping over sideways, like in a cartoon.

The door under the stairs is closed. The dogs wait in front of it, wiggling and wagging, while the boy, not once looking at me, struggles to get a huge ring of keys out of his front jeans

pocket. He picks a key, unlocks the door, and pushes it open. I can see another set of stairs, going down.

The dogs surge, pulling the boy down the stairs, and the door slams shut behind them. Loudly. And then everything is quiet again.

I know exactly what Dad would say if he were here. He wouldn't mention the weird stuff—how the dogs ran straight to a mystery door under the stairs, or the kid's enormous key ring.

Dad would only say, "Look, Georges! A boy your age."

sir ott

The first thing Dad does is hang the Seurat in our new living room. It's not a real Seurat, because that would make us millionaires. It's a poster from a museum. I feel a little better as soon as I see it on the wall above the couch, exactly where it always was at home. I think we both do.

Two summers ago we went to Chicago, where the real painting takes up one entire wall of the Art Institute. What you can't tell from our poster is that the picture is painted entirely with dots. Tiny little dots. Close up, they just look like blobs of paint. But if you stand back, you see that they make this whole nice park scene, with people walking around in old-fashioned clothes. There's even a monkey on a leash. Mom says that our Seurat poster reminds her to look at the big picture. Like when it hurts to think about selling the house, she tells herself how that bad feeling is just one dot in the giant Seurat painting of our lives.

When I was little, I thought my parents were calling our poster the "Sir Ott," which is how you pronounce *Seurat*, the name of the artist from France who painted the picture. And

I still think of the poster that way—like it’s this guy, Sir Ott, who has always lived with us.

In my head, Sir Ott has a kind of personality. Very polite. Very quiet. He watches a lot of television.

Seurat’s first name? It was Georges.

Here’s a piece of advice you will probably never use: If you want to name your son after Georges Seurat, you *could* call him George, without the S. Just to make his life easier.

After Sir Ott is up on the wall (and perfectly level), Dad and I start with the kitchen stuff, unwrapping dishes and glasses. It’s amazing how much work it is to move just twelve blocks.

I’m tossing all the silverware into a drawer until I remember that Dad will probably have a heart attack because he can’t stand to see things all jumbled up like that, and so I stop and do it right—forks with forks, tablespoons separate from teaspoons.

We make a good team, and soon we have about ten giant plastic bags stuffed with the crumpled-up newspaper everything was wrapped in.

“Let me show you the basement,” Dad says. “That’s where the garbage and recycling go.” Because the garbage is my job.

At our house, doing the garbage meant wheeling two big plastic bins out to the curb. I could take both at once, steering them in two directions around the crack on the broken concrete path and bringing them back together again on the other side. It’s not as easy as it sounds. It’s a big crack: I tripped over it when I was five and chipped my front tooth. I imagine the new owners of our house hitting that crack on trash day, their cans tipping and their garbage going everywhere.

Dad and I toss the bags of newspaper into the hall, making a small mountain. When the elevator opens, there's a guy in it, standing next to two big suitcases. He's wearing a baseball cap with a fish on it.

Dad tells him we'll take the next one. "Don't want to drown you," he says, pointing at our massive pile of recycling.

"I appreciate it!" the man calls as the door is closing.

Dad and I watch the beat-up metal arrow on the wall above the elevator move from 3, to 2, then L, for lobby. Dad loves old stuff like that, like the big yellow chandelier downstairs and the tiled hallway floors that will never, ever be clean again. He calls it "faded elegance." That's sort of his job now—he's officially still an architect, but ever since he got laid off last year, he mostly helps people make their new houses look old. Which I think is a little crazy, considering that there are plenty of old houses they could just buy in the first place.

Dad's getting fired has a lot to do with why we sold our house. Mom says it was partly a blessing in disguise because Dad's always talked about starting his own business, and now he's finally done it. So far he only has three customers. Or clients, as he calls them.

The basement has bumpy gray walls and a few lightbulbs hanging down from the ceiling on neon-yellow cords. There's a line of garbage cans against the far wall. Dad and I stack the bags of paper in the recycling area.

Next to the last garbage can, there are two doors. One of them says SUPERINTENDENT. There's a pad taped to it, with

a stubby pencil hanging from a string, and a Post-it that says:
DATE YOUR WORK REQUESTS.

The second door has something stuck to it too—a piece of loose-leaf paper with words scrawled on it:

Spy Club Meeting—TODAY!

I can't tell how old the paper is, but it's a little curly around the edges.

Dad is studying it. "What a ridiculous sign."

"I know—dumb."

"I mean, how are we supposed to attend the meeting if they don't announce the time?"

"Ha, ha."

"I'm serious." Dad takes the pencil-on-a-string from the superintendent's door and stretches it over to the Spy Club notice. It doesn't quite reach, so he has to write along the very edge of the paper:

WHAT TIME?

When Dad gets an idea into his head, it's no use trying to stop him. So I just watch him do it. Dad writes with these perfectly even block letters. They teach you that at architecture school.

"Can we go now?"

Upstairs, Dad has me flatten a stack of empty boxes while he puts the books on the bookshelves. I catch myself thinking about that Spy Club sign, and how some kid might get excited that someone is actually coming. But that sheet

of paper has probably been stuck up there for months. Years, even.

“I should probably take some of these boxes downstairs,” I say.

“Want me to come?” Dad is looking at the bookshelves, deep in thought, deciding exactly which book should go where. Once, Mom came home from work and discovered that he had turned all the books around so that the bindings were against the wall and the pages faced out. He said it was calming not to have all those words floating around and “creating static.” Mom made him turn them back. She said that it was too hard to find a book when she couldn’t read the titles. Then she poured herself a big glass of wine.

“I can handle the basement,” I tell Dad. “You finish the books.”

Downstairs, I prop the boxes against the wall and glance over at the Spy Club notice.

Under Dad’s *WHAT TIME?* something is written in orange marker:

1:30?

Great. Now Dad has gone and raised the hopes of some kid in the building. I stand there for a minute, then stretch the stubby-pencil string over to the paper the way Dad did.

OK, I write.

When I get back upstairs, Dad has a book in each hand and he’s just staring, like his life depends on which one he

picks. He's surrounded by five boxes, all still full of books. He'll never be done.

"The blue one," I tell him.

He nods and puts it on the shelf. "I was leaning toward the blue." He stands back. "What do you think so far?"

"Looks good. And it's less echoey in here now."

"You want to call Mom at the hospital? We can fill her in, tell her how it's going."

"Maybe later." I don't like the way Mom's voice sounds at the hospital. Tired.

"I need lunch," Dad says. "DeMarco's?"

I say yes to pizza. "But can we make it quick?" I ask. "I have a meeting downstairs at one-thirty, thanks to you."

Dad stares at me for a second and then bursts out laughing. "Seriously? The Spy Club? I was sure that sign was ten years old!"

But of course he loves that I'm going through with it.

"What if it's a seven-year-old or something?" I complain on the way to DeMarco's.

"Only one way to find out," Dad says cheerfully. As if he isn't to blame for the whole situation.

Spy club

I get to the basement at 1:31 p.m. The Spy Club door is open, just a crack, and there's light coming from inside. I'm holding a little bag of crumpled-up newspaper, for camouflage, in case it is a seven-year-old.

I carry my bag down to the last trash can—the one closest to the open door. Making as much noise as possible, I open the lid and dump my “garbage” in. But no one comes out of the room.

I stand in front of the door and listen. There is no sound at all. I push the door with one finger, so that I might have just accidentally bumped it. It swings wide open.

It's a tiny little room, almost a closet, with dingy walls, a concrete floor, and one lightbulb dangling from the ceiling in a way that's slightly creepy. There's a tiny painted-over window high up on the back wall that lets in some light from outside. But not much.

The only thing in the room is a folding table with spindly metal legs. Sitting cross-legged on the table is a girl with

short dark hair and bangs that draw a straight line across her forehead. She looks about seven years old.

“You came!” she says. She’s wearing fuzzy pink slippers. There’s an open book in her lap.

“Uh, no. I was actually just throwing out some garbage,” I say. “Look, I’m sorry. My dad thinks he’s funny, and he was the one who—”

“Don’t worry,” she interrupts, “it’s not *my* stupid club.”

“It isn’t?”

“No. I’m just here to get paid.”

“Paid for what?”

“I’m a scout.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, you know.” She closes the book and dangles her legs off the front of the table. I can now see that her fuzzy pink slippers have little ears. And eyes. I think they might be pigs. “Scouts look for traps, setups, that kind of thing.”

“How old are you?” I say. “And what kind of traps?”

“Older than I look. And who knows what kind of traps? I told you, I’m doing this for the money. I make fifty cents every thirty minutes. That’s a dollar an hour. Do you think I’d be doing this for free? For a dollar I can get a pack of Chicks, Ducks, and Bunnies SweetTarts. They only sell them in April and May. That’s what I’m doing later. My mom is taking me to the Chock-Nut.”

I realize she means Bennie’s, where I’ve gone almost every day of my life after school to buy a snack. Bennie has a faded blue awning that says CHOCK-NUT, but nobody actually calls it that. When I was in kindergarten and first grade, Bennie

would slide a plastic milk crate under the counter for me to stand on so I could see the candy better. I wonder if he does the same for this girl. I think how Bennie is a good guy.

She hops down from the table, landing silently in her pig slippers. “But once I get there, I might go for a Cadbury Crème Egg instead—that’s another seasonal candy.”

“But—who’s paying you?” I ask.

“Safer is paying me.”

“What’s *Safer*?”

“Safer is not a what. He’s the twelve-year-old human standing right behind you.”

I whirl around and find myself standing nose to nose with the dog boy.

“I’m Safer,” the dog boy says.

“One dollar, please!” The girl holds out her palm.

Safer takes a folded dollar bill out of his back pocket and hands it to her.

“Wait,” I say. “You were sitting there for an *hour*?”

“Fifteen minutes,” she says. “Plus forty-five more on the lobbycam during lunch.”

“The lobbycam?”

“Yup. Watching you and your dad go out for pizza. It took you exactly forty-three minutes, in case you’re wondering.”

Before I can ask her what the heck she’s talking about, Safer pushes her out the door. “*Goodbye*, Candy,” he says to the back of her head. “Tell Mom I’ll be up in a little bit.”

“Wait,” I say when he’s closed the door behind her. “Her name is Candy?”

Safer looks at me. “Yeah.”

“And your name is—Safer?”

“Yeah.”

I smile. I have a strong feeling that I’ve just met two kids who will never make fun of my name.

Rebecca Stead is the author of two previous novels, *First Light* and *When You Reach Me*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the Newbery Medal and the *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Award for fiction. She lives in New York City with her family.

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