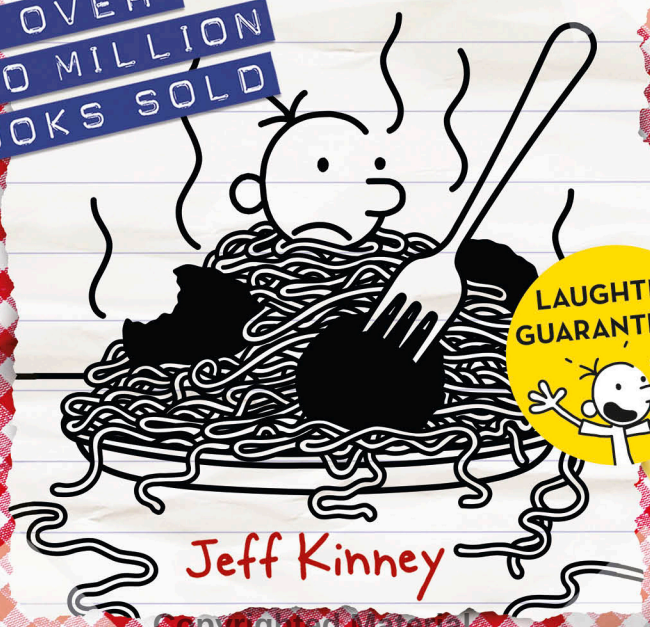
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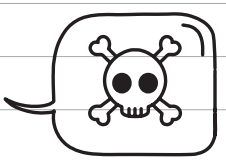
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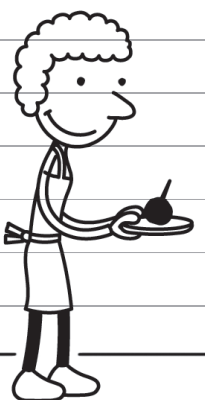


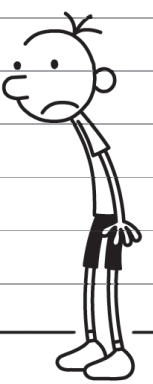
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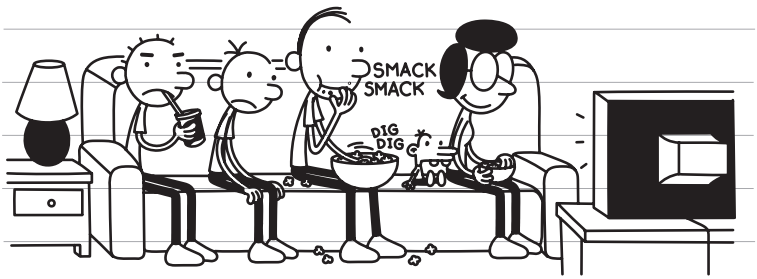
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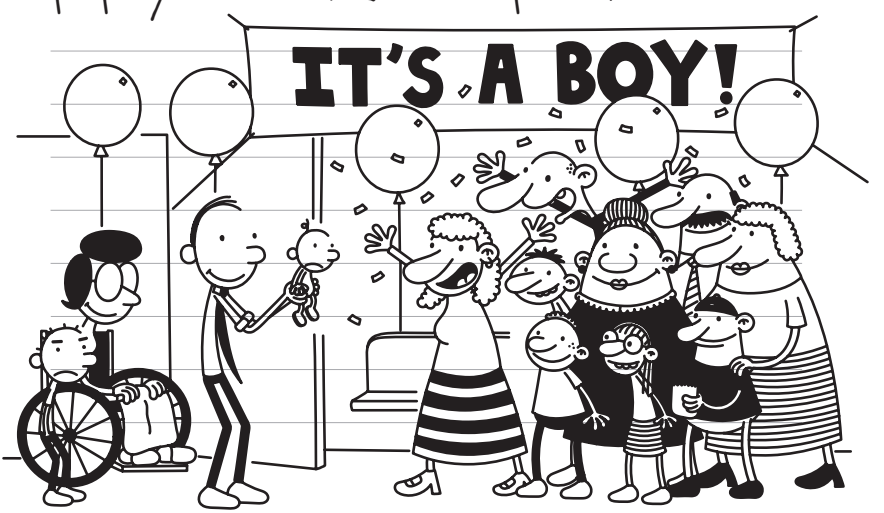
JUNE

Monday

My dad's always saying you can pick your nose, but you can't pick your family. And even though I get his meaning, it doesn't exactly make me want to share a bowl of popcorn with him.



He's right about family, though. Because the second you're born, you're automatically in a group of people you never asked to be a part of.



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In fact, when you're born, a BUNCH of stuff has already been decided for you, like where you'll live and even what language you'll speak. But since you can't actually TALK yet, you can't tell the people taking care of you that mushed-up prunes and carrots are a bad combination.



The first thing you learn as a kid is that grown-ups are the ones in charge. And the SECOND thing you learn is that they don't always make the best decisions.



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Then you find out that the people in charge of YOU have people who are in charge of THEM.

At least that's the way it is in my family, where Gramma's the one who calls the shots. But you'd never know she had so much power just by looking at her.

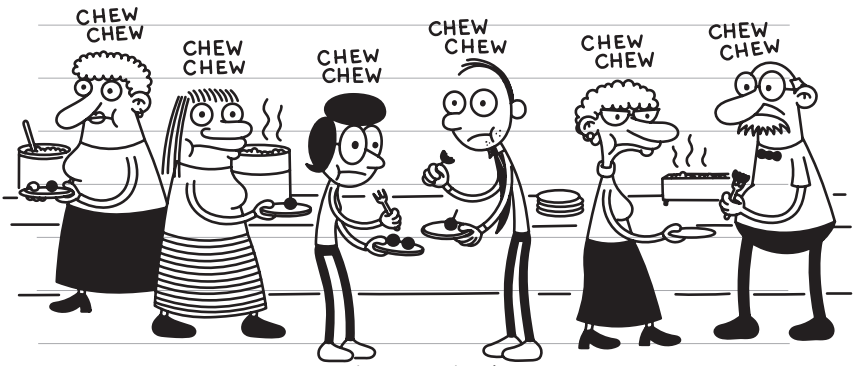


There's actually a whole story to how Gramma became the head of our family.

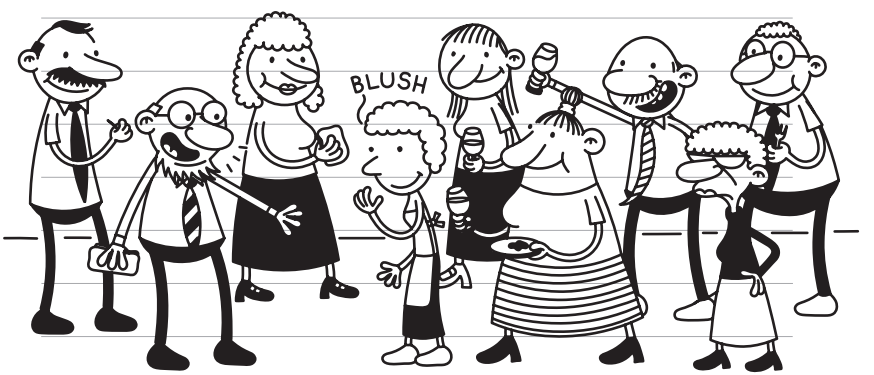
When my great grandmother Meemaw passed away, someone needed to step up to take her place as our leader. But since Gramma was the youngest of four sisters, it didn't look like she'd be the one to take over the family.

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But then something happened that changed all that. For Easter brunch one year, Gramma made a pot of meatballs, and everyone went CRAZY for them.



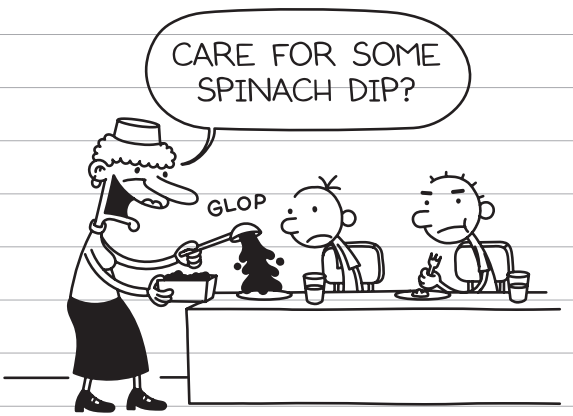
Great Uncle Herman declared that Gramma was the best cook in the family. Everybody else agreed, which I'm sure was hard for her older sisters.



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The way it works in my family is that if you're the best cook, you get to host the big holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. But Gramma's older sisters all live far away, and they don't like to travel on the holidays.

So Great Aunt Lou came up with a special recipe of her OWN to try and one-up Gramma, but she just couldn't top Gramma's meatballs.



Ever since Gramma introduced her special meatballs, everyone's been trying to get her to tell them the secret recipe.

But Gramma's no dummy. She knows that giving it up would be giving up her POWER.

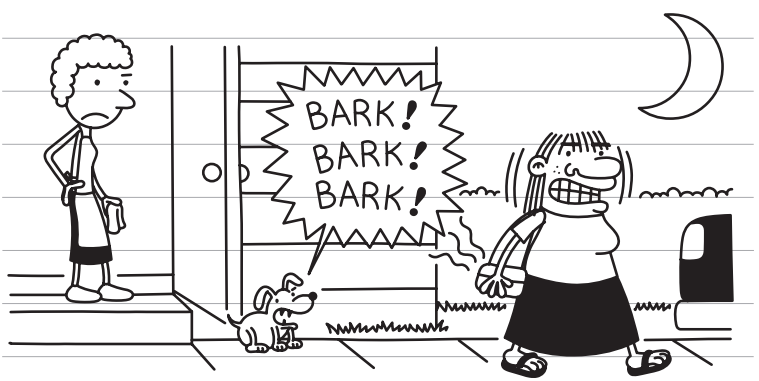
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So she just tells everybody that her meatballs only have one ingredient, and it's "love."



Nobody seems satisfied with that answer, though, and lately a few of my aunts have been trying to STEAL the recipe.

Last Christmas, Aunt Gretchen tried to sneak away with a few meatballs so she could take them to a lab and get them analyzed for their ingredients. The only reason she didn't get away with it was because Gramma's dog, Sweetie, sniffed them out before she could get to her car.



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Then, one night, Aunt Audra came to stay with Gramma and hid her phone in a kitchen cabinet so she could record Gramma making a batch of meatballs. But Gramma discovered the hidden phone and put it in the garbage disposal.



Everybody's always telling Gramma her recipe is so good, she should open a restaurant and make a pile of money. My Aunt Veronica is a businesswoman, and she even came up with a plan for a whole CHAIN of restaurants that would serve Gramma's meatballs.

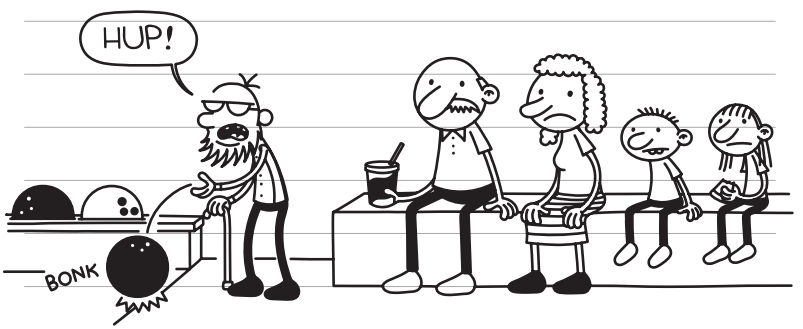


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But Gramma shut that idea down by saying that you can't get a real home-cooked meal in a restaurant, and her meatballs were only for the family.

I don't mean to sound harsh or anything, but I hope Gramma shares her recipe with someone in the family SOON, because she's not getting any younger. In fact, she just moved out of her house and into an assisted living center a few miles away.

Mom says Gramma's happy there because she's with people her age and they have lots of activities. But I sure hope my kids don't try and ship ME off to a place like that when I'm old, because I'm actually looking forward to being a burden to my children.

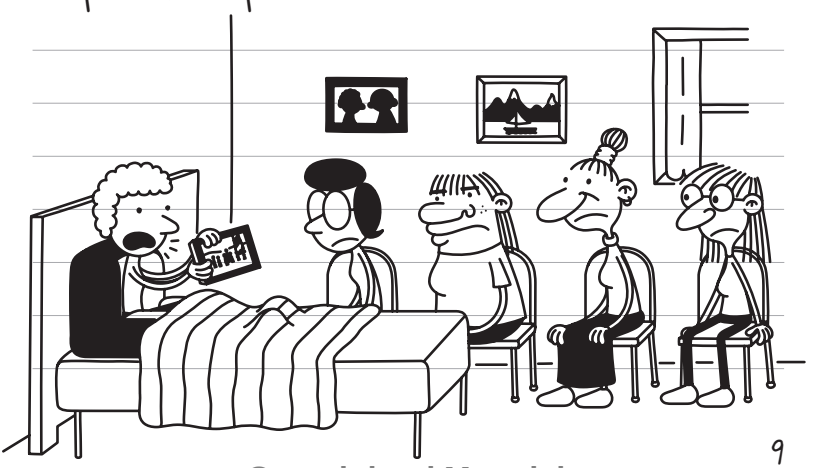


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Gramma's turning seventy-five soon, and my mom and her sisters told Gramma they wanted to throw a big party for her birthday. But Gramma says she doesn't want anyone to go to any trouble for her, and she doesn't have the energy for a party like that anymore.

Then Gramma said what would make her REALLY happy is if everyone else went to Ruttyneck Island, where the family used to vacation back when Mom and her sisters were kids.

Gramma said the only gift she wanted was a photo of the whole family on the beach with the old lighthouse in the background, like the picture she keeps in her apartment.

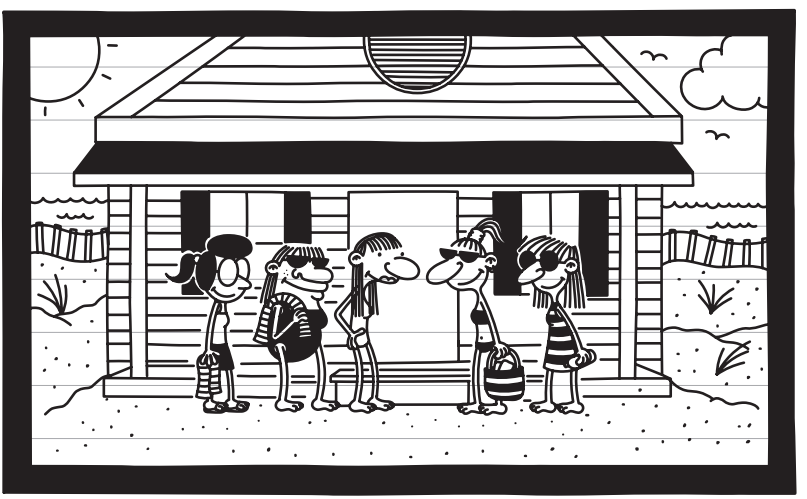


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I guess Mom and her sisters couldn't say no to Gramma's birthday request because they'd feel too guilty.

So just like that, everybody's summer plans got turned upside down, which proves Gramma is the one pulling the strings in our family.

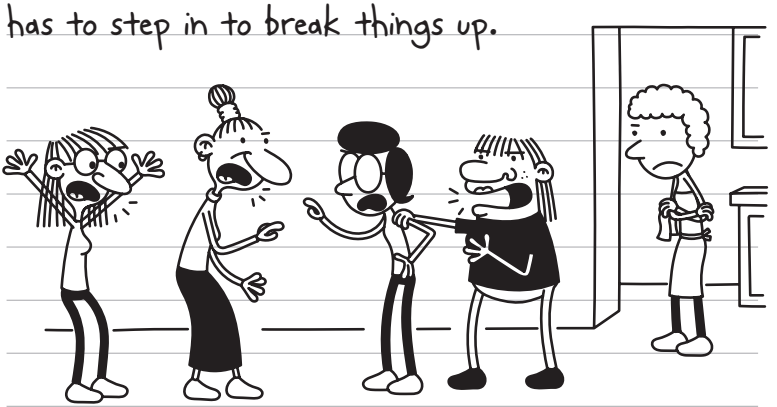
I'm not looking forward to this trip, though, because I'm really not a beach person. But Mom says we'll make happy family memories, and she even booked the same house they stayed in as kids to make the vacation extra special.



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From the picture, the beach house looks a little small to me, and there are a whole lot more people in the family now than there were when Mom and her sisters were young. But what I'm really nervous about is the combination of people going on vacation together.

Mom and her sisters only see each other a few times a year, and there's a reason for that. Whenever they're together, all they do is FIGHT. And sometimes it gets so bad between them that Gramma has to step in to break things up.

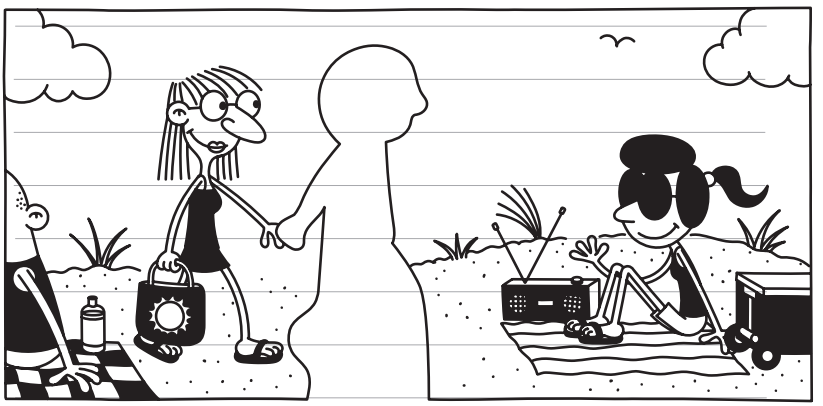


So I want to say for the record that this whole trip is a bad idea. The way I see it, a family vacation is like a recipe, and some ingredients just don't mix.

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Tuesday

Mom's been trying to get me and my brothers excited by showing us old photo albums from her family vacations on Ruttyneck Island. But every so often, there's a page where someone was cut out of a picture.

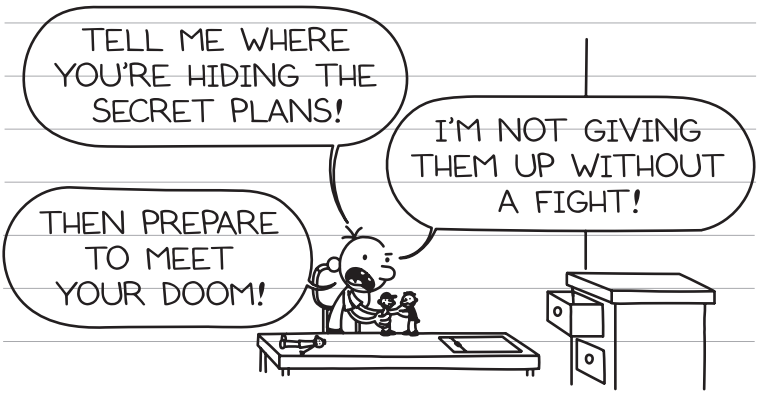


Mom explained that if one of my aunts dated some boy and they broke up, Gramma would cut them out of the photo. That's because she feels like family photo albums are only for FAMILY.

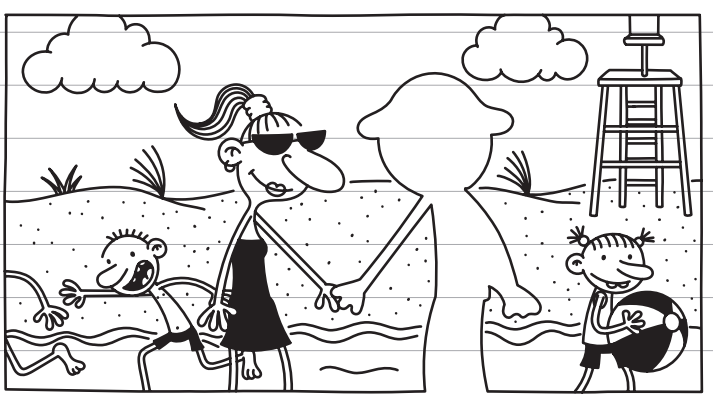
All of a sudden, something I always used to wonder about made sense. When I was little, I found an envelope stuffed with cutouts of teenagers, and I never knew who they were.

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I'd play with them like they were action figures, and I created these crazy storylines for each character.



The last time Mom's family went to Ruttyneck Island, she and her sisters were in high school. Aunt Cakey must've had a boyfriend that summer, because there were a bunch of pictures of her next to someone who'd been cut out.

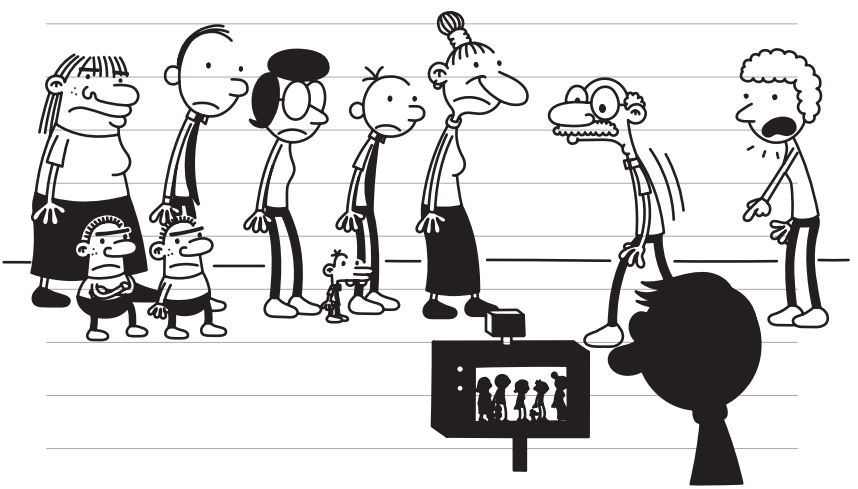


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But when I asked Mom about Aunt Cakey's boyfriend, she said it was a long time ago and she couldn't remember anything about him.

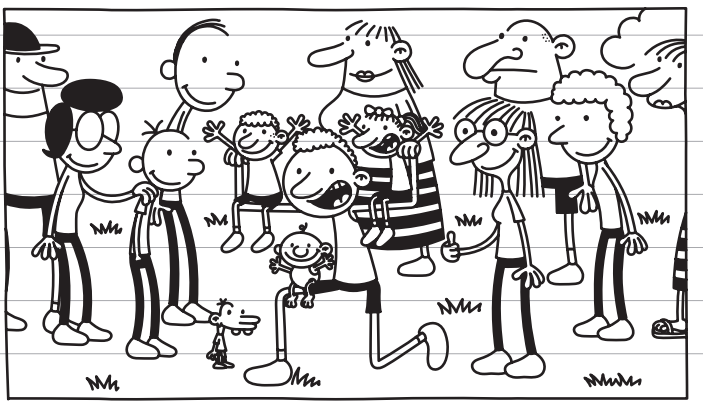
I guess Gramma got sick of cutting ex-boyfriends out of photos, because eventually she made a rule that you're not allowed to be in family pictures unless you've officially married in.

And that's a little awkward for Vincent, who's been dating Aunt Cakey for six years but always has to stand behind the camera when we take our family photos.



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We learned our lesson about this kind of thing by taking too many pictures of Noah, who dated Aunt Veronica for a while. Everybody in the family LOVED Noah, and he was front and center in a lot of our pictures.



In fact, a couple of times, he even made it into our family newsletter that Gramma mails out every year.

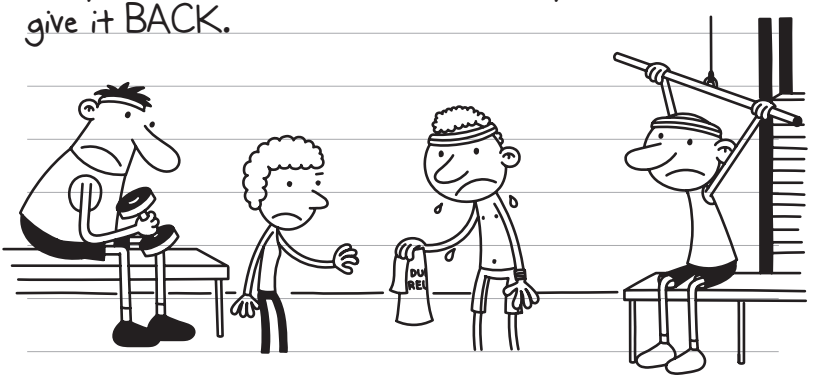


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Unfortunately, it didn't work out between Noah and Aunt Veronica, so he vanished from the family newsletter. And that made things kind of awkward whenever our family would run into someone who was on the mailing list.

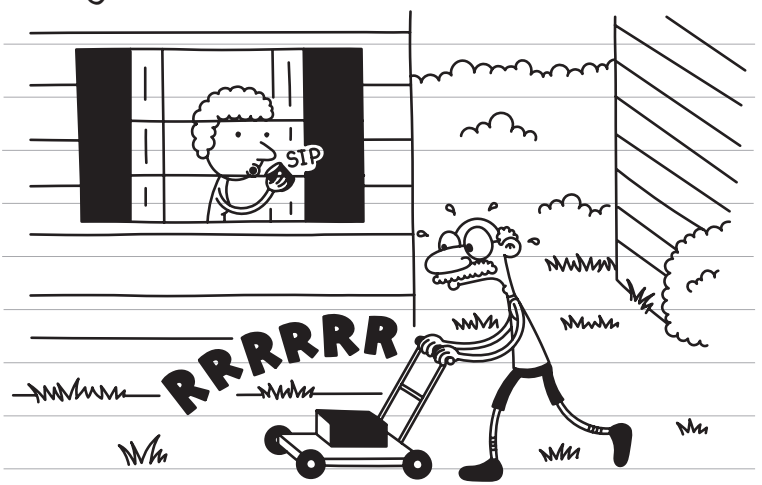


But what was even MORE awkward was when Gramma found out Noah still had a T-shirt from our family reunion, and she went to his gym to make him give it BACK.



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I think Vincent's planning on proposing to Aunt Cakey one day, and he knows he needs to get Gramma's blessing first. He's been working hard to impress her, but I can tell she's gonna milk this as long as she can.



To be honest, I really don't understand why Vincent's so eager to be a part of our family. In fact, if he wants MY slot, I'd be happy to just hand it to him.

And I don't know if there are lawyers or paperwork involved in that kind of a deal, but I'd be willing to do whatever it takes to get this thing done.

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