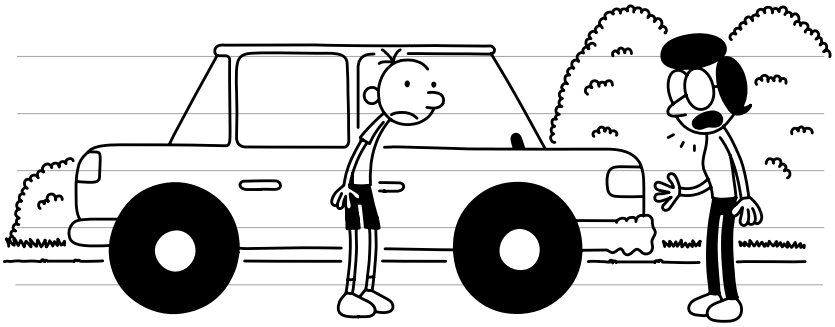


But she said since the fender was all banged up, he'd find out ANYWAY.



I realized my only option was to get out of town. And I thought of the PERFECT way to do it.

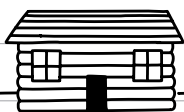
The class trip to Hardscrabble Farms starts today and goes for a whole WEEK. I figure by the time I get BACK, Dad will have cooled down, at least a little.

So I told Mom I changed my mind about the trip, and she was all excited.

She called the school to make sure I could still go, and luckily there were a handful of spaces left in the cabins.

I went through my book bag and found the packing list they sent home last month to check what I needed to bring.

## Hardscrabble Farms Supply List



Bug spray	Jeans
Hiking boots	Plastic bag
Raincoat	Sunscreen
Canteen	Toiletries
Day pack	Wool socks

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NO electronic devices  
NO junk food

It was too late to go out and shop for all that stuff. Luckily, Mom found Rodrick's duffel bag in the garage, which he had never unpacked from when HE went on the trip a few years ago.

Inside were some hiking boots, a raincoat, a canteen, bug spray, and a bunch of other things on the list, which was great.

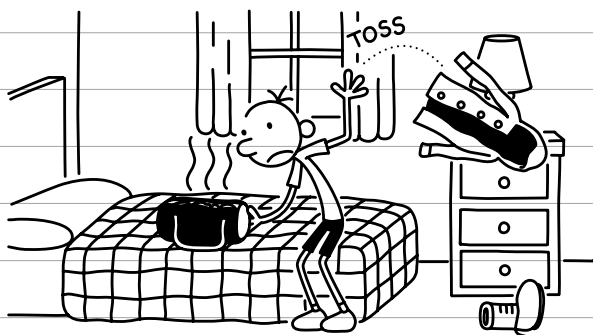
But the bag REEKED because there was a half-eaten ham sandwich in there, which had something growing out of it.



I was a little worried about the food situation at camp, and I was tempted to try and sneak a few candy bars in. But I wasn't sure what the penalty was if you got CAUGHT, so I decided to just hide them in my sock drawer so nobody would eat them while I was gone.

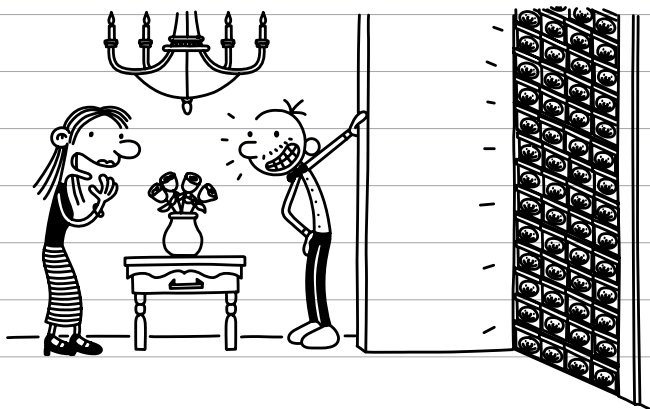
I wasn't willing to take any risks when it came to my COMFORT, though.

I stuffed three whole containers of Freshies into Rodrick's bag, even though that meant I couldn't fit the raincoat.

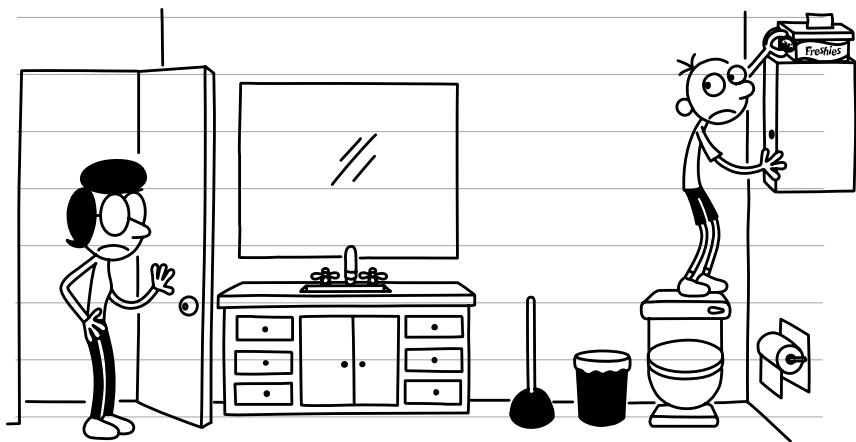


I buried the Freshies at the bottom of the bag because I didn't want Mom to know I was taking them. Mom says baby wipes are too expensive for everyone to use on a regular basis and they're reserved for MANNY.

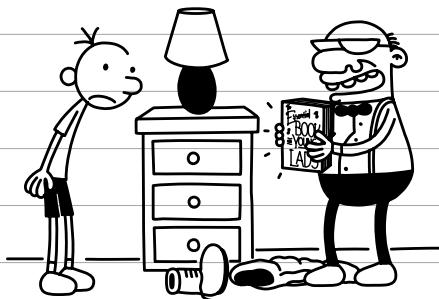
See, this is the main reason I want to be rich when I'm older. When I have a ton of money, I can buy as many baby wipes as I WANT.



But until I have money of my own, I'll have to keep raiding Manny's supply.

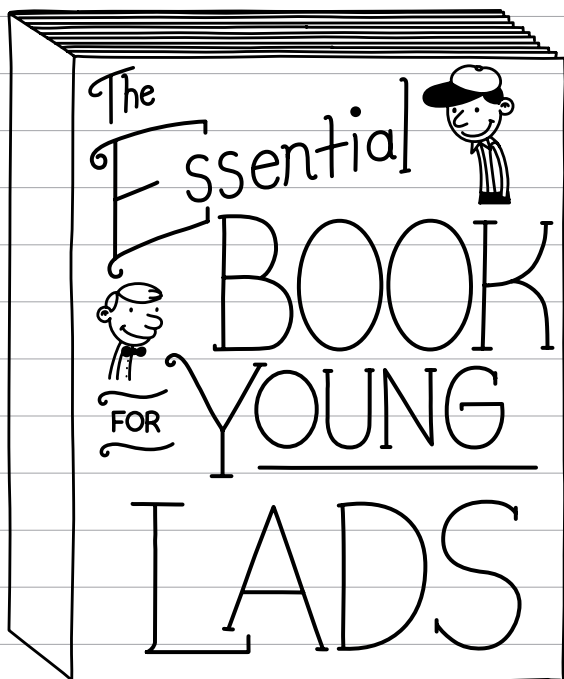


When I was just about ready to leave for the trip, Grandpa gave me a book he said might come in handy.



Grandpa said the book belonged to him as a kid, and he gave it to Dad when HE was my age. Now he wanted ME to have it.

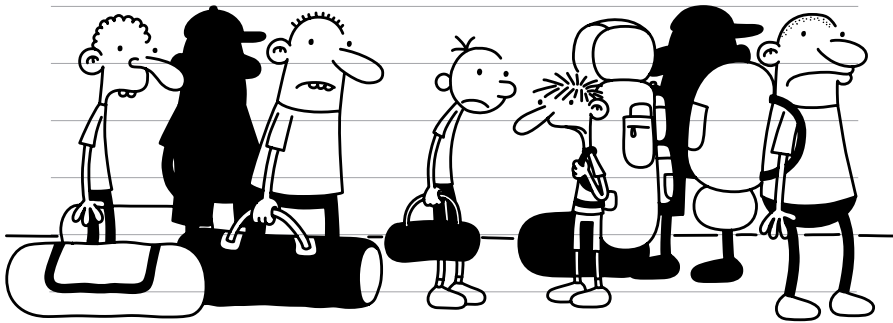
It looked a little outdated to me, but I didn't want to hurt Grandpa's feelings. So I told him I'd take it with me and read it the first chance I got.



There was JUST enough room to fit it in my bag, and I figured the more stuff piled on top of the Freshies, the better.

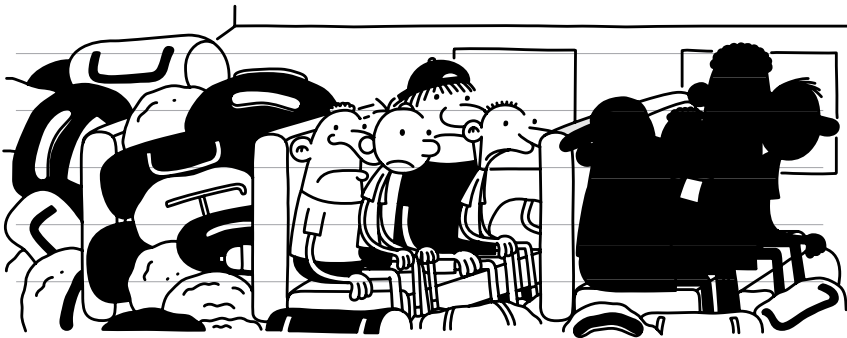
When Mom dropped me off at school this morning, though, I realized I was SERIOUSLY unprepared for this trip.

Everybody else had a TON of gear, and I felt like I had underpacked.

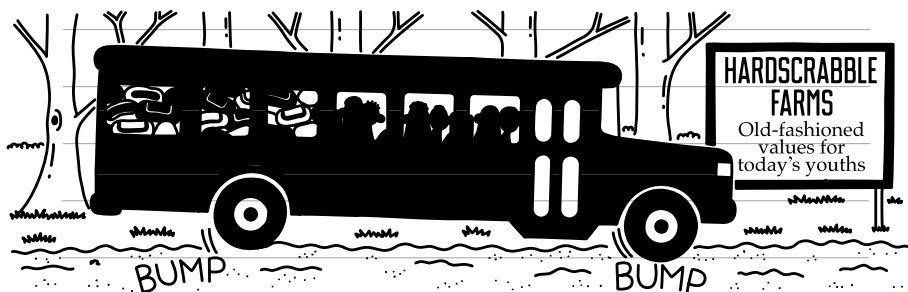


After all our stuff was loaded onto the bus, the bags took up at least half the space.

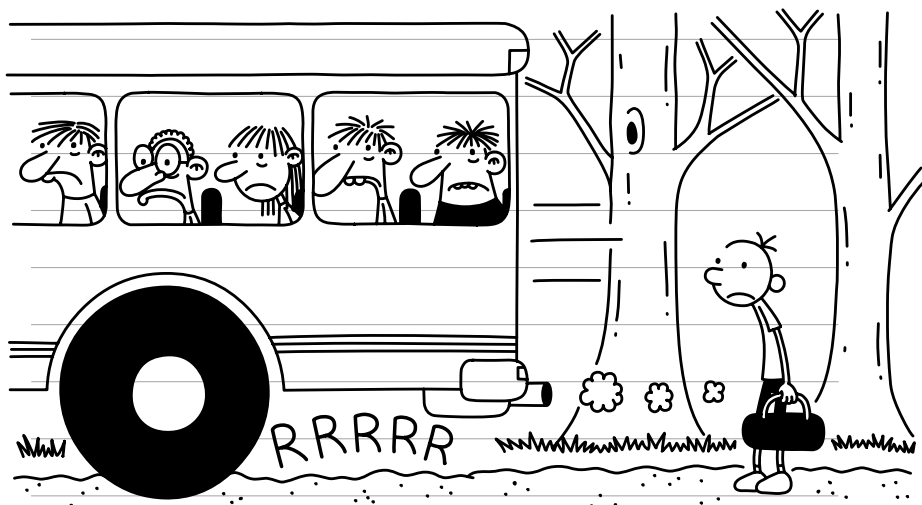
That meant we had to double up on seats, which made the ride to Hardscrabble Farms feel a LOT longer than it should've.



When we finally got there and drove through the main entrance, I was pretty relieved. But the last stretch was BRUTAL because it was a dirt road.

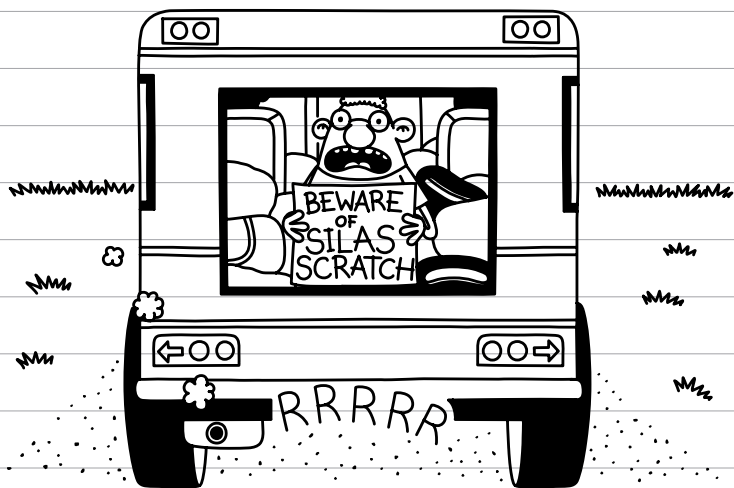


When we got off the bus, a group of kids from another school was just leaving. And they looked like they couldn't be getting out of there soon enough.



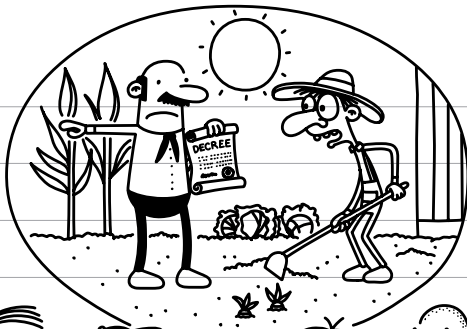


A kid in the back was holding a handwritten sign that didn't make any sense to me.

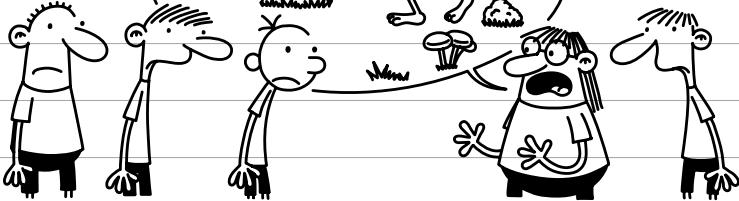
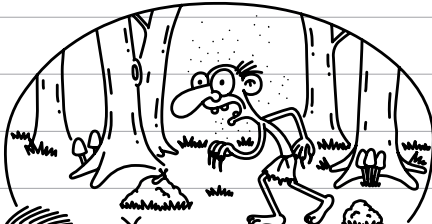


A couple of my classmates seemed pretty freaked out when they saw it. A boy standing next to me said his older brother went to Hardscrabble Farms a few years back and told him all about Silas Scratch.

Apparently this Silas Scratch guy was a farmer who lived at Hardscrabble Farms a long time ago, but then the county came in and kicked him off his land.



Another kid chimed in and said HE heard Silas Scratch went to live in the forest, where he survived by eating slugs and berries. Then Melinda Henson said she heard he went CRAZY and grew his fingernails really long.

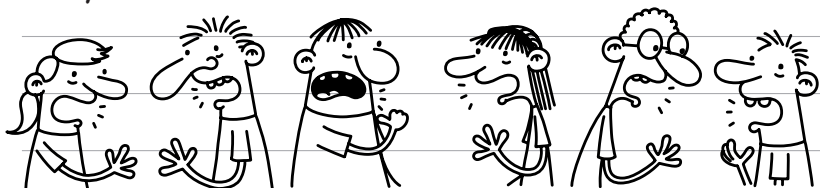


See, I could've done without the part about the long fingernails, because that sort of thing really gives me the willies.

One of our chaperones, Mr. Healey, said that when HIS class went to Hardscrabble Farms, a kid named Frankie came across Silas Scratch's shack in the woods. And after Frankie saw it, he was never the same.



Anyone who hadn't heard of Silas Scratch BEFORE knew about him NOW, because the story spread like wildfire.

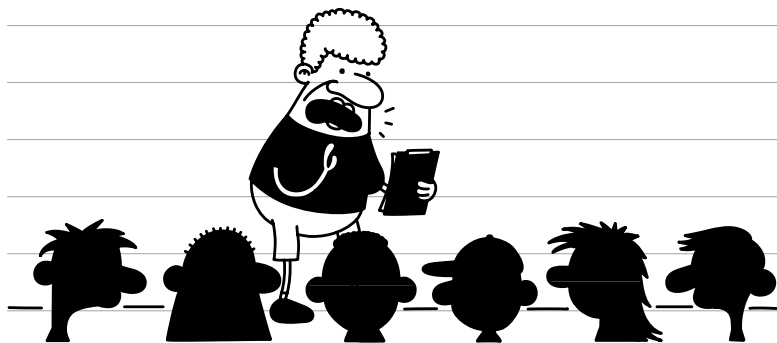


I found the whole Silas Scratch thing disturbing.

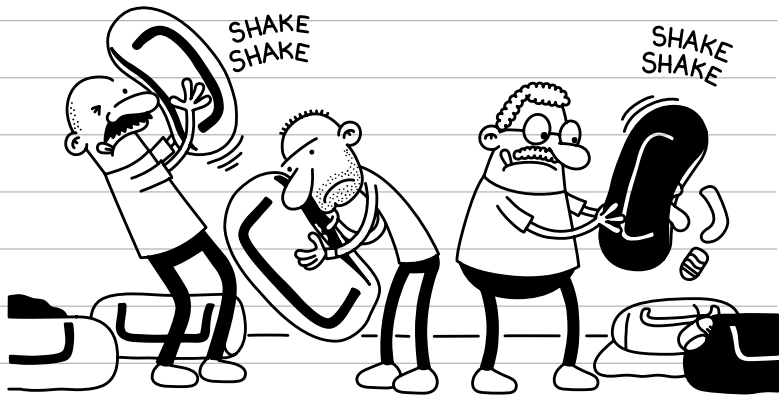
I GUARANTEE you, if anyone told me there was a deranged farmer prowling the grounds of Hardscrabble Farms, I would've just stayed home and taken my chances with DAD.

After we were done unloading the bus, we brought our stuff down to the main lodge, which was a giant log cabin with a bunch of long tables inside.

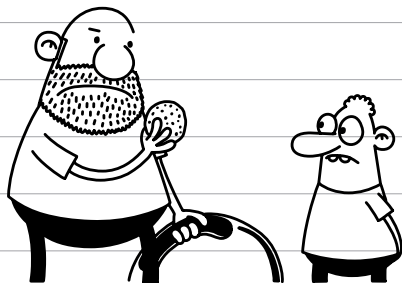
The person in charge was Mrs. Graziano, and once everyone sat down, she gave a speech about the camp rules. There were a BUNCH of them, but the one she said was most important was that boys and girls aren't allowed to visit each other's cabins for any reason.



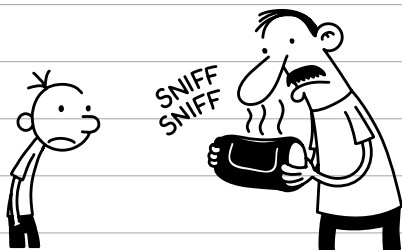
Mrs. Graziano said this was her nineteenth year coming to Hardscrabble Farms, and she wasn't gonna put up with any nonsense from anybody. Then she had the chaperones go through everyone's bags to make sure nobody was trying to sneak in any junk food or electronics.



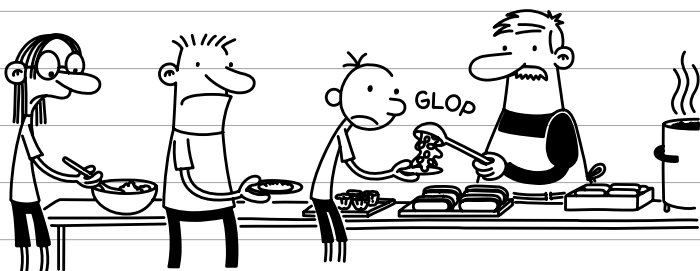
A few kids got busted with stuff in their bags. Mike Barrows had a pound of Swedish Fish in his backpack, and Duane Higgins got caught trying to smuggle in a giant chocolate-chip cookie.



I was really glad I'd left those candy bars back home, but I was a little worried the chaperones might confiscate my baby wipes. Once Mr. Jones caught a whiff of my bag, though, he didn't go digging any further.

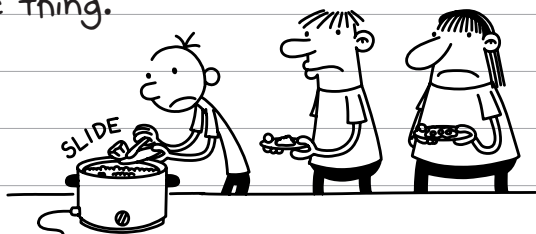


After that we had lunch, which was hot dogs, baked beans, and stuffed peppers. There weren't any other choices, so if you didn't like any of those things, you were out of luck.



When lunch was over, the chaperones told us to scrape our leftovers into a giant pot.

I hadn't touched my stuffed pepper, so I dumped the whole thing.



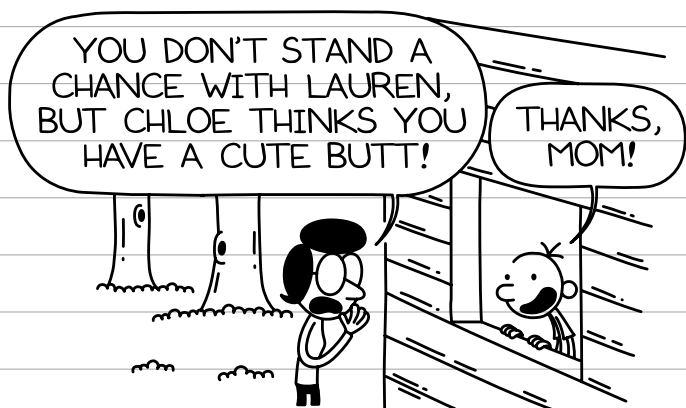
I asked Mr. Healey why we put our leftovers into a pot instead of the trash can. He said at Hardscrabble Farms no food goes to waste, and everything we didn't eat for THIS meal is put into a stew for the NEXT one.



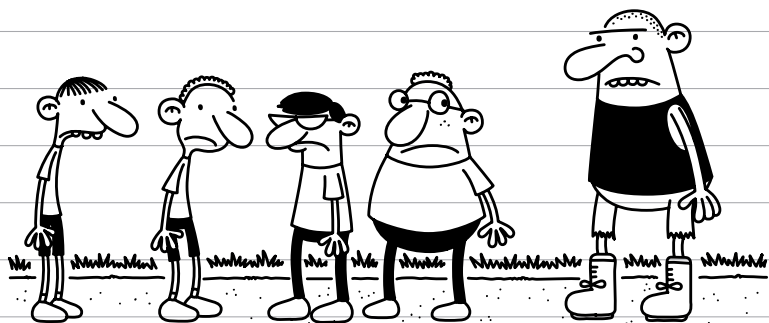
He said it was the same way when he came to this camp as a kid, and they still used the exact same pot. That means there could be leftovers from thirty YEARS ago in that thing.

After lunch Mrs. Graziano and the female chaperones took the girls to the other side of camp to go to their cabins.

Mom had actually wanted to volunteer as a chaperone last-minute, but she wasn't comfortable leaving Manny with Rodrick and Grandpa. That kind of stinks, though, because she could've fed me inside information from the girls' side of camp.



Us guys stayed back in the cafeteria to get our cabin assignments. Most of the groups were kids who hang out together at school, but each cabin seemed to have ONE kid who didn't belong.



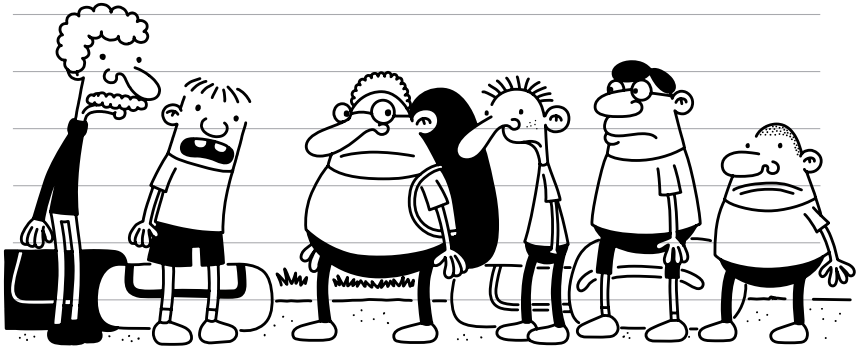


The school must have decided to spread the troublemakers out so there wouldn't be more than one in any cabin.

The only group that had MORE than one troublemaker was Mr. Nuzzi's group. But Mr. Nuzzi works as a prison guard, so I guess they figured he could handle it.

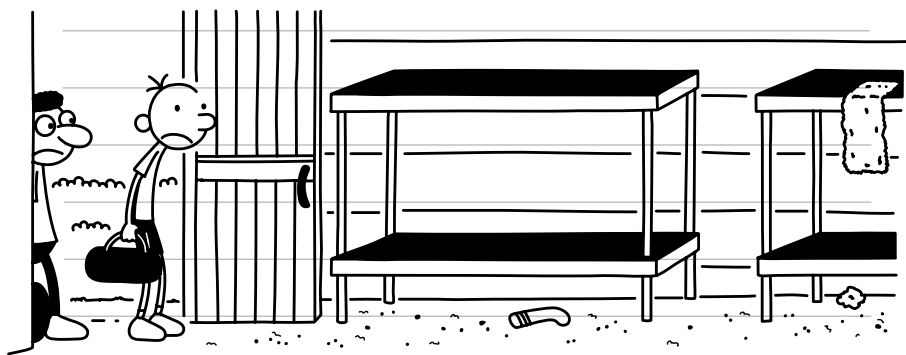


Since I registered late, I got put with the group of LEFTOVERS, which included Rowley.



I was glad I got assigned to the same cabin as Rowley, but I wasn't happy his FATHER was the chaperone. Mr. Jefferson has never really been a big fan of mine, and I wasn't looking forward to being cooped up with him for a whole WEEK.

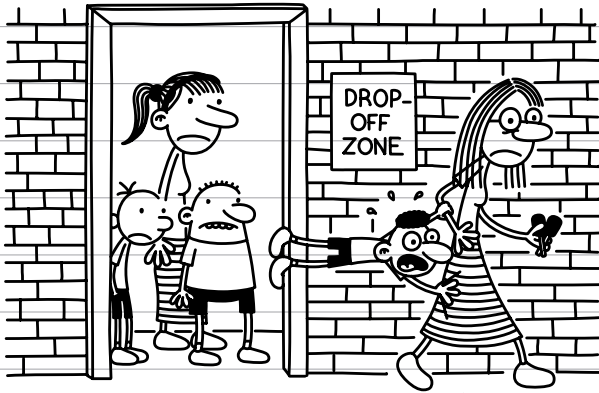
It was pretty clear whoever had our cabin last didn't bother cleaning up after themselves.



One kid in my group, Julian Trimble, seemed to be taking the situation pretty hard, because his lip started to quiver as soon as we walked in the door.

I was kind of surprised Julian decided to come on this trip, because I'm guessing he's never been away from his parents overnight before.

Julian was always the kid who made a big scene every morning during drop-off time at school. Once, in second grade, he had such a strong grip on his mom that the vice principal had to come down to peel them apart.



I figured Julian decided to go on this trip on his OWN, but when I remembered the scene at the school this morning, I started to wonder if his mom actually tricked him into it.

