

Fruit of the Vine

Second Edition



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Animated images in FRUIT OF THE VINE were created by animator, Alex Wiltz,
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Justin stepped off the school bus and started to walk along the side of the road leading to his house. He quickly focused his attention on the dirt and pebbles that tumbled under his feet. The powdery earth lifted up slightly and swirled around his feet as he walked, while tiny stones danced and bounced off the tips of his sneakers. While he continued, his head bowed low and his eyes fixed on the ground beneath him, he was unable to block out the shouts from the bus' windows as it revved its engine and vibrated.

“Geek!”

“Weirdo!”

Someone threw a ripened banana peel out of one of the windows. It landed on a patch of gravel that was several feet away from where Justin was walking.

“Don’t slip!” someone yelled.

Just as Justin stepped over the slimy black and yellow debris, someone tossed an empty milk carton out of a window. Another hurled a cluster of grapes that hit his cheek.



He cradled his upper body in his arms and hastened his pace. With his long, thin fingers, he could feel how bony his elbows were. He could picture the kids on the bus studying the freckles on his face and his absence of chin. His ears were overly large, and his nose was pug. His eyes were hidden behind foggy, wire framed glasses. He felt that he must have been some sight to behold, much like a performer at a carnival freak show. The difference was that while those people purposefully sought out and welcomed an ogling crowd of spectators, all Justin wanted was to be invisible. At the very least he wanted to blend into the scenery like the stones and dirt he shuffled with his feet on his way home.





Night had fallen. Justin crawled into his bed and lifted a blanket first over his mouth, then over his chin and nose, and finally over his eyes. It was dark under there. The only hint of brightness Justin could see was the filtering of the hallway night light. It was sneaking through some woven holes in the blanket over his head.

He wanted it to be darker, but he was too exhausted to walk outside of his bedroom to pull the night light out of its socket. He was too tired even to just inch his way over to his bedroom door and close it. All he could do was close his eyes very tightly and make his world as black and motionless as he possibly could. He shut his eyes and waited for everything to disappear.

He turned his head to one side on the plush pillow he rested it on. Why couldn't every moment in his life be as quiet and peaceful as when he nestled in the soft, full comfort of his bed? How could life be so gentle and sweet during the long hours of the night, only to be rattled and shaken when the sunlight streamed through a cluster of high clouds and the first teases and taunts shot through the chilly morning air?

He didn't know.

What he did know was that he would enjoy his quiet solitude for as long as it was able to last. He would push one big floppy ear hard into his pillow, and keeping the blanket pulled tightly over his little eyes and sizable nose, he would drift off to sleep.



The feeling of chills racing through his body jostled him awake. It was almost as though he had fallen asleep in a tent on campgrounds moistened by a fine mist and cooled by late autumn breezes. But he was not out camping. He was sleeping in his soft bed, his head lost in a fluffy pillow, his face covered with a blanket. He folded it down away from his eyes, expecting to see the dark outline of his bedpost, and the silhouette of his partly open bedroom door against the dimly illuminated hallway wall.

But what was this?

A tree?

Sand?

Ocean?





Dawn had arrived, and he was not in his bedroom anymore. In place of his plush pillow and soft bed was a sandy beach. His bedpost was now a swaying, coconut-bearing palm tree, and the hall light had been replaced by the rays of the sun.

Was this a joke? Did someone actually go to such lengths as to take him from the safety of his nightly womb and dump him in the middle of... nowhere? Or was he somewhere? Where *was* he, exactly?



He hesitantly stood up from the patch of sand he had been lying on and brushed some loose grains off his pajama bottoms. The sand was cool and dry, and it slipped off the fabric easily. Chilly breezes tousled his hair and formed little bumps on his skin that made the hair on his arms stand up. Ironically, there was a soothing comfort to the rustling sounds of the light winds swimming through the leaves of a nearby palm tree. It would have been so much more pacifying if Justin had even just a hint as to where he had awakened.



In the distance, standing under the branches of a palm, was the dark shadow of a being Justin could not identify. Its head was large and smooth and oval, perched on top of what looked like an elongated neck extending into a long and narrow body. Its torso similarly smooth and lacking any evident traces of fur or hair, was at the center of two spindly arms and two very long and thin legs. The creature was simply standing motionless at the base of the tree, with its pointy shoulders hunched forward, its arms draped flat against its body. If any human quality at all could be ascribed to this creature, Justin would think that it appeared to be sad, somewhat pitiful.

The black outline of the form began to move after staying in a frozen, statuesque stance for what seemed like an unusually long length of time. As it started to migrate away from the palm tree, Justin leapt back behind a huge, seaweed-strewn rock.

“Ouch! Man, that hurt!” Justin heard a squeal from underneath his feet. He realized he had stepped on something that had the ability to communicate its distress in lazy English.

“You get three wishes, dude,” a voice said from below.

“Huh?” Justin was dazed. “Who’s... *what’s* this?”

“You step on the magic snake, dude, and you get three wishes. That’s just the way it goes. So, what are they?”





Justin backed slowly away from the area he heard the voice coming from. As he moved away from the rock, a cobra slithered out from underneath it. It stretched its body high into the air and looked up at him.

“You...” Justin shut his eyes tightly and then opened them again. “I don’t get this. Wait.” Justin laughed nervously and waved his hand at the snake. “You can... *speak*? A *snake* can speak? Yeah, right...” He felt his way through the air above the snake’s head and searched for signs of marionette strings. “This is too much,” he said. “Someone’s messing with me, and I’m going to figure out who it is and how they’re pulling this off.”



“I ain’t just a snake, dude,” the cobra hissed. “I’m a *magic* snake. And you have three wishes. You step on me, and I have to grant you three wishes of whatever you want. Those are the rules, boy. So, what do you want? A girlfriend? Perfect S.A.T. scores?”

“This is too surreal,” Justin said. “A... talking... *snake*?”

“Dude,” the snake said. “Get over it, will you? And tell me what you want already. I have things to do. Come on. What are the wishes? New 64 GB iPad? Wide angle binocular telescope? Full vintage 1960’s Marvel Comics collec...”

The snake was interrupted by a strange sound in the distance. It was coming from the creature, which was hunched over with its round head buried in its hands. It looked like it was crying.



“Who... *what* is that?” Justin asked. “And where am I? What’s going on?”

The snake hissed and wiggled away from the rock. “Irvino.”

“Irvino? What’s... what’s an Irvino?”

“Irvino’s the name of that dude crying over there,” the snake said impatiently.

“He’s a Werloobee. Can you just tell me your three wishes so I can grant them and get outta here?”

“A... Werloobee? What’s that?” Justin asked.



“Kiddo, you’re cruisin’ for a bruisin’, you know that?” the snake hissed. “Do I look like an encyclopedia, or what?”

“I don’t know where I am or what’s going on,” Justin said. “I was sleeping in my bed one minute, and next minute I’m... I don’t know *what* or *where*. Can you just tell me what that thing is over there?”

“Werloobee... Wer-loo-bee,” the snake enunciated. “Come on, you honestly don’t know what a Werloobee is? What kind of rock did you just crawl out from underneath of?” The snake started to laugh. “Did you get that joke? Get it? I mean, me, a snake, asking *you* what kind of rock *you* crawled out of!”

Justin stood quietly, looking down at the snake, his mouth taut and straight across his face.

“No sense of *humor*, man!” the snake said, inching its way toward the tip of Justin’s sneaker. “So, a Werloobee, for those of us who apparently have led a very sheltered existence, is the island’s main inhabitant. Hey, I really *do* sound like an encyclopedia, don’t I?”

“Where am I? What island is this? And how did I get here?” Justin asked.

“Well, dude, all I can tell you is this. The ocean’s right over there.” The snake pointed its head toward the waves of water rolling on shore. “And I think this is one of them... how do you say it... archipelago types of places. As to *exactly* where you are, like in terms of degrees north or south or east or west like the position of a cyclone on the open waters, I just ain’t knowledgeable enough to let you know. Look, man. Give me your wishes. You’re really starting to annoy me. I got things to...”

The snake’s voice was drowned out by the sound of more cries in the distance. Irvino was still hunched over and wailing.

“What’s the matter with him?” Justin asked.

“Dude’s been banished.”

“Banished? What do you mean?”

“He’s been cut off from the rest. They didn’t want him around. They didn’t like him,” the snake said.

“There are *others*? Where?”





“They’re on the other side of the island. Look, if you don’t give me your three wishes, dude, I’m gonna...”

“What didn’t they like about him?” Justin asked.

“He was different, man,” the snake said. “You know, different from the rest. Smaller. Three wishes, before I go out of my mind over here.”

“Is that why he’s crying?” Justin asked. “Because he’s all alone, away from the others?”

“I doubt it,” the snake said. “He was probably happy to get away from them. They were always picking on him and pushing him around.”

“Then what’s he so sad about?”

The snake sighed. “Dude, do I *really* have to get into this with you? After this, I’m telling you... I am going to be so unbelievably careful not to get stepped on. This is so not worth it.”

“Just tell me,” Justin said.

“Why do you care?”

“I just do. Tell me, okay?”

“If I were a real jerk, I’d make this count as one of your wishes. But because I’m a nice, man-about-town kind of guy, I’ll let this one slide. Okay. So, this dude Irvino was banished to a part of the island that isn’t very fertile.”





“Not fertile?” Justin asked. “What do you mean?”

“Man, you just have to have every little thing spelled out for you, don’t you?” the snake said, sighing loudly. “So, like, Irvino’s upset because he’s been banished to a part of the island that has very little food. He’s hoping to put on some weight and get a little bigger so he can look more like the other dudes, but all he’s got is this one banana tree that grows overripened bananas that are so rotten that he can’t eat them. Then there’s this one crazy cow on this part of the island that always makes milk that tastes too spoiled to drink. And there’s one grapevine growing that’s constantly losing its grapes, which fall to the ground only to be stomped on and mashed by the crazy cow. So that’s why he’s upset. Now what are your wishes, dude?”



Justin looked over at Irvino, who had stopped sobbing. The creature was silent now, with his tall, oval head hidden behind his long, thin fingers.

“Why are the others being like that?” Justin asked. “Because he’s different? Because he has his own way about him? His own style? Because he isn’t a boring, carbon copy of the rest?”

The snake yawned. “I’m still waiting for your three wishes, man. Gettin’ tired of repeating myself.”



Justin's face reddened. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and he wiped them angrily off with the back of his hand. "You know what I wish?" Justin growled, unable to control his rage. "You *really* want to know what I wish? I wish those rotten bananas over there would turn into this awesome banana cream pie! I wish that sour milk from the crazy cow would turn into the most scrumptious of yogurt! And I wish those mashed grapes would turn into the sweetest, most delicious juice I've ever drank!"



The snake looked quizzically up at Justin and remained quiet for a moment. Then it shook his head, drew a deep breath, and stretched its body high into the air.

“Okay, dude. Here you go,” the snake hissed. A sliver of red tongue shot out from its mouth, and its head began to wildly vibrate. The ground rumbled, and soon rolls of sand along the beach formed in rapid succession and raced underneath shallow waves of ocean water. Funnels of fiery smoke darted out from both sides of the snake’s head. Its eyes bulged out of its sockets as it focused on the banana tree.

Whoosh!



A mushroom of explosive smoke enveloped the tree and then slowly cleared. Once the last puffs of thick, hot air drew away, what stood in the tree's place was a large tin filled to its rim with banana cream pie. The snake turned its attention to the cow. Its eyes protruded and its tongue thrashed madly about.



Whoosh!

Charcoal black smoke danced around buckets of spoiled, curdled milk nearby where the cow stood. Once the final spirals of twisting dark air pulled away, the buckets sat overflowing with rich, creamy yogurt.

The snake's head then moved wildly about before positioning itself to face the trodden grapes mashed into the ground. Streaks of bone white lightning flew out of the snake's eyes and branched out into the open air.

Whoosh!



White and yellow flames danced on the ground underneath the twisted grapevine. One by one the flames died down, replaced by silver clouds of smoke that eventually thinned out and disappeared. A trough of sparkling juice came into view behind the last wisps of departing smoke, the surface of the liquid rippling.



Irvino's head swung rapidly to the left and right as he neared each item of delicious food. He hovered over the trough of juice and drank it in big, thirsty gulps. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he dashed to the buckets of yogurt and dipped his hands deep inside of them. He then buried his face in his yogurt-filled hands and licked them, moaning with delight.



In the distance, Justin could see Irvino's dark silhouette expanding against a group of palms as he ate, drank, and groaned with satisfaction. With one final sip of sweet juice, Irvino stood tall and stretched his arms out to both sides. A shattering wail erupted from his lips, a wail so resounding and powerful that the earth beneath him trembled, and random creatures scurried away to safety.



A hush fell over the island then, a hush so deafeningly quiet that all that could be heard was the sound of waves tumbling against the ocean sand. Justin's head jerked in response to movements in his peripheral vision. He turned toward a group of palm trees not far from where Irvino stood, where he could vaguely see the dark outlines of large ovals peeking in and out of branches and peering out from behind willowy trunks.



There seemed to be hundreds of them, oval heads smooth and sizeable, much like Irvino's. Slowly, cautiously, the heads began to emerge from behind the palms, and within seconds Irvino was surrounded. Lanky arms reached out to touch him and lift him high above all of the large, bubbly figures bobbing about and cackling and conversing. Irvino lifted his arms up into the air and leaned his head back, emitting cries of what sounded like joyous laughter.

A raucous celebration seemed to go on for hours. Justin quietly crouched behind the rock with the magic snake by his side, emerging only when the last audible cheers and applause had quieted down and the bands of Werloobees retreated, leaving Irvino alone to bask in his newfound serenity.

Irvino's head raised up and his eyes darted over to where Justin stood, stretching his stiffened legs and aching back. Irvino strained his neck in the direction of the rock and began clumsily edging his way toward it.

"What should I do?" Justin asked the snake frantically as he squatted again behind the rock. "Huh? What should I do?"

"Chill, dude," the snake hissed. "He isn't gonna hurt you. Irvino's cool."

Irvino continued to creep closer, pausing only to crane his neck and peer over the rock to see what was behind it. The snake bravely slithered away from Justin.

"Hey, babe. What's happenin'?" the snake asked Irvino, wiggling toward the Werloobee's enormous, webbed feet. "Congrats, my main man. Look at you, all buff and proud now. Heh, heh! Best lookin' with the best cookin'. Hey, speakin' of which... You wouldn't believe how out on a limb this dude over here went for you."



Irvino's eyes crossed, and his head cocked to one side. He listened intently to the snake, glancing curiously over at Justin.

"This crazy dude had three wishes that I could grant him, but instead of using those wishes on himself, he used his wishes on *you*."

Irvino whimpered softly and began to nervously wring his hands. He rocked back and forth in place for a few seconds and then started to take wobbly steps toward Justin.

"Aaaah!" The snake's body was momentarily trapped under the heel of Irvino's foot as the Werloobee continued to lumber toward Justin. Irvino wrapped his long, thin arms around the boy and squeezed him tightly.

"Not again," the snake hissed. "Irvino, man, you gotta watch where you're going. You got three wishes coming your way now. But please don't take as long as the dude did, okay?"





Irvino released Justin from his embrace and slowly turned around to look down at the snake, which was lying very still with half of its body flattened and pressed into the ground. Irvino grunted twice before whistling through what appeared to be his nose, broad and hooked in the center of his face. His two large, soulful eyes blinked a few times before he erupted into one final, high-pitched wail.

“Hey, man, thanks,” the snake said, before the squashed part of its body was enveloped in swirls of misty air. The flatter portion of the snake’s body swelled to match the thickness of parts that hadn’t been crushed by Irvino.



“I’ve never run into more selfless folk than the two of you dudes,” the snake said. “Irvino, you got two more...”

“I’d like to go home,” Justin interrupted. “Could Irvino use one of his wishes to get me back home?”

The snake looked over at Irvino. “Hey, I’d say it’s only fair, man. This dude was only thinking about you before when he used up all three of his own wishes. It’ll be nice payback if you return the favor. You’ll still have one wish left that you can use for yourself.”



Irvino's eyes opened wide and slowly filled with tears. He reached an arm out to Justin and placed his hand on Justin's shoulder. He turned his head back toward the snake and grunted a few times.

“Irvino wants to know if you're *absolutely sure* you want to go home. Apparently, he likes you, and doesn't want you to leave,” the snake said to Justin.

Justin looked into Irvino's eyes. He nodded his head slowly, and said, “I'm sorry, but yes. I'm sure.”

Huge tears slid down the front of Irvino's wide, flat face. He hesitantly looked down at the snake and bowed his head as if to grant the snake his approval.



“All right, man. Then it’s show time,” said the snake.

Suddenly both the snake and Irvino disappeared from view as Justin found himself surrounded by bright, white steam. The steam, warm and thick, crept into Justin’s mouth and nostrils and filled his lungs and diffused into his veins. The steam’s anesthetizing heat made Justin’s limbs grow limp and numb, and gradually lulled him into a deep, restful slumber.



“Goon!”

“Wimp!”

The sounds of shouting and laughter startled Justin. He lifted his head away from the cold pane of glass it had been leaning against, and he wiped some saliva off of the corner of his mouth and chin.

Where was Irvino? Where was the snake? Justin sat straight up in what he realized was a cushioned seat on his school bus. Hecklers from the back of the bus were throwing hand-folded paper airplanes and spitting wet, slimy cherry pits in Justin’s direction. A hand reached over the back of Justin’s seat and set an empty milk carton on the top of Justin’s head. He angrily swatted it away.



His mind was still somewhat asleep. He ran his tongue over his teeth, trying to get some moisture flowing into his dry mouth. He wondered how he got to where he was. He wondered where he had been. He thought about Irvino. Had he made the last of his three wishes? And if so, what was it? What could he possibly still want or need, seeing that he had the love and admiration and respect of everyone and anyone who he had ever known?

Wet, slippery cherry pits continued to fly at Justin through the stale air of the bus. Most soared past his head and bounced off the back of the seat in front of him. Occasionally one would land in his hair, and he'd have to fish it out with his thumb and forefinger. He felt another empty milk carton being balanced on the center of his scalp. Again, he irritably swept his hand across his head and knocked the carton to the floor.



A shrill howl suddenly cut through the commotion and brought all of the children to silence. Justin's head swung around, and he found his eyes locking with those of an enormous blond-haired child standing in front of the emergency exit door at the back of the bus. The child's piercing blue eyes shifted away from Justin and narrowed like a cat's as he started to walk between the seats and up the bus aisle. All pranksters were immobilized in their seats as the portly boy slowly sauntered past them, his eyes glaring at their stunned faces.



The boy's tense posture relaxed, and a broad smile swept across his face as he eased his way into an empty seat next to Justin's. Still smiling, he winked at Justin.

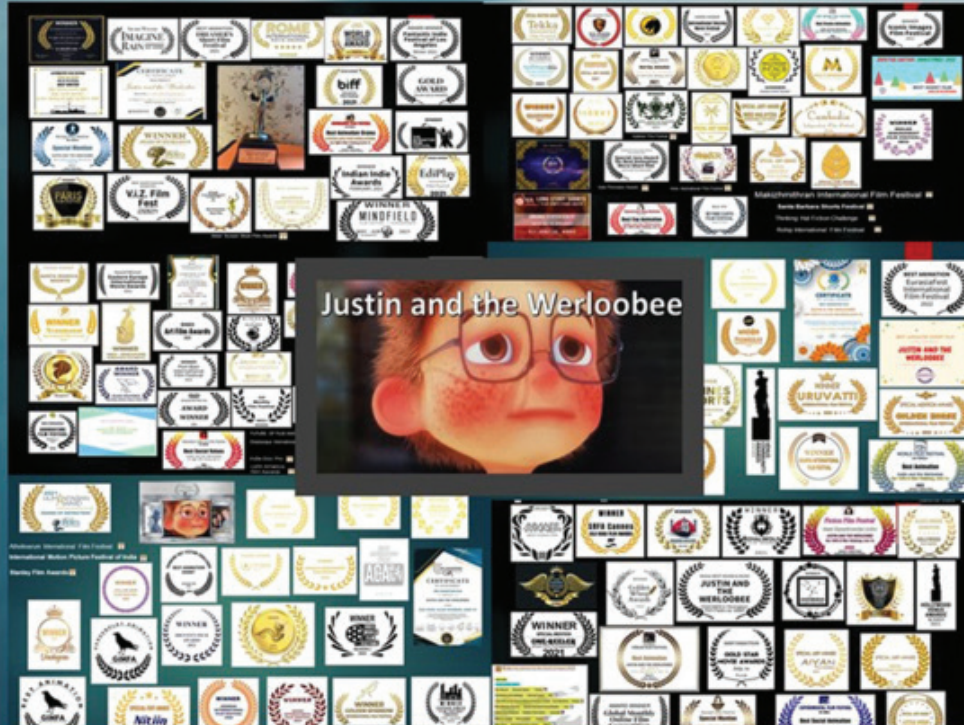
"Name's Irvino," the boy said. "You can call me 'Irv' for short." He held a small cardboard carton of grape juice out to Justin, who accepted the gesture. Justin placed his dry, thirsty lips on the edge of a tiny sipping straw, and quickly began to drink.

The sugary juice trickled easily down Justin's parched throat. After one final gulp, Justin licked his newly moistened lips, savoring the delicious aftertaste of the beverage. His new friend sat quiet and still, a contented expression on his face. Justin smiled as well, relishing the sweetness of a wish and the splendor of a dream.

The End



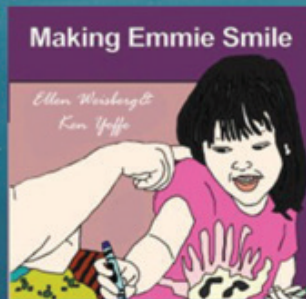
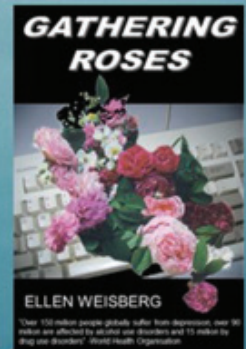
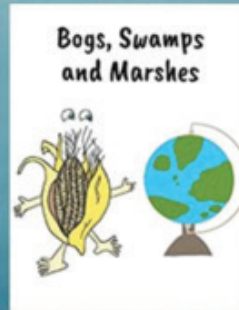
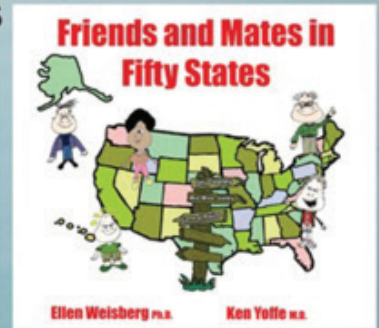
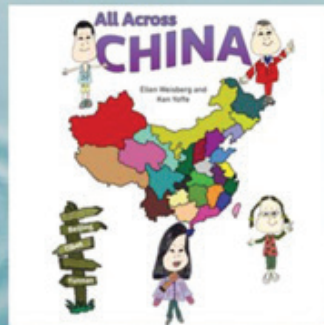
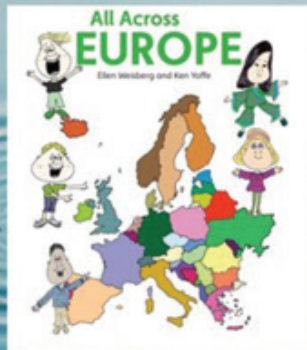
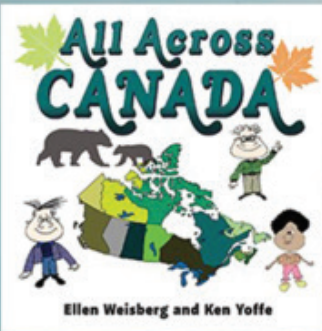
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