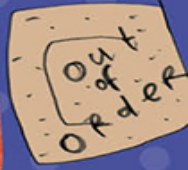


T A P T A P T A P

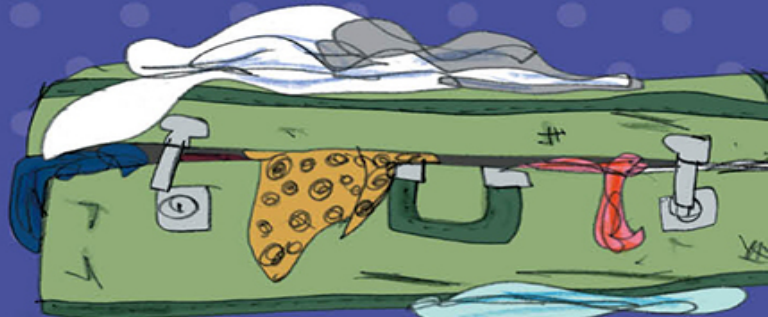


THE KEY
THAT SWALLOWED
JOEY PIGZA



JACK GANTOS

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID TAZZYMAN



Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1: House-of-Pigza

Chapter 2: Meat Cleaver

Chapter 3: School

Chapter 4: The Oracle

Chapter 5: Office

Chapter 6: Ruined

Chapter 7: Bounce

Chapter 8: Taps

Chapter 9: Black Box

Chapter 10: Smells Like Hope

Chapter 11: Ding-Dog!

Chapter 12: The Secret Key

Chapter 13: In a Hole

Chapter 14: The Scream

Chapter 15: House-of-Pigza

About the Author

Also by Jack Gantos

Praise

Copyright

About the Book

'Joey, you are the man of this house.'

Joey Pigza is trying to stay **POSTIVE** but the odds are stacked against him: his mom's in hospital; his Frankenstein-faced father wants to snatch his baby brother away and he's still as **WIRED** as ever. In all this **CHAOS** can Joey find the key to bring the House-of-Pigza back together again?



JACK GANTOS
ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID TAZZYMEN

RHCP DIGITAL

For Anne and Mabel



1

HOUSE-OF-PIGZA

I'm Joey Pigza, and here I am again back in my roachy-row house on Plum Street and living my whole wired past, present and future, all at the same time. I'm sure I need a triple med patch for living the hop-skip-and-a-jump life I lead, but at the moment the house seems to have used them all up. A few weeks ago Mom slipped into one of her drifty moods and hid my meds, or maybe she just said she hid what's left of them because we don't have the cash to pay for more. Who knows what she did, because when she's spacy her memory gets all fluffy like skywriting that fades away for good. But she keeps telling me not to worry because my meds are in 'a baby-safe place' and that when she gets all drifty again she'll remember where they are.

I don't blame her for wanting to keep my meds out of harm's way, because she doesn't want baby Carter Junior getting into them by accident. He's the opposite of me, and if he got a hold of my meds I figure he'd get wired up and start zooming around the skirting boards doing wheelies

like a psycho baby in nappies, or else he'd be taking a zonked-out snooze for a few months like a bear cub in hibernation. I'm not really sure what my meds would do to him, but either way we'd have to call 911 for an ambulance and the next thing you know the Child Welfare people would haul Mom away for being a dud mom. I don't want that to take place, but my clock is ticking, and without my meds who knows what kind of meltdown I might have in this roached-out house?

In fact, it seems like all the bad things in my life started right here in this crazy house on Plum Street. I even stuck one of my med patches on the front door, but when the meds didn't change our home life for the better, I scrawled *Out of Order* across the patch and left it stuck there. I always thought this house caused trouble, but once we got away from it the trouble just came right along with us like the busted furniture we hauled to the new house. And now that Mom and I and baby Carter Junior are back in the old house with all the old furniture, the bad stuff has started haunting us all over again. Maybe if I lived in a new house, with all new stuff, everything would change for the better. But deep down inside I don't think so. I can't blame who I am on *where* I live, because who I am is *how* I live. My old sped teacher, Special Ed, once told me you really get to know a kid by the type of games he makes up. I think my all-time favourite game was swallowing my house key on a string and pulling it back up with a little drippy lunch dangling on the end, and then doing it again. I perfected it at home, but when I swallowed it at school my teacher cut the string. I won't give you the potty details, but a day later I did get that same key back. It dropped out of my *revolving door* the natural way. And even though I washed it a hundred times with soap and hot water, nobody in class would sniff it - not even if I licked it first!

So, here's my new favourite game. At night, I stand dead still in our pitch-black kitchen and sprinkle a packet of

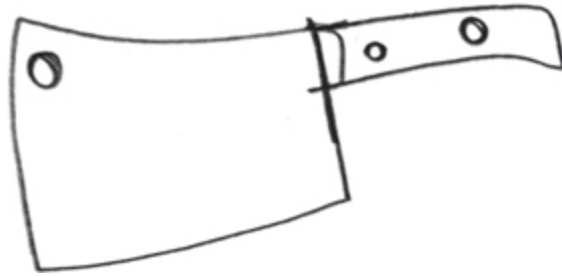
coffee-shop sugar around my feet. Then I take a deep breath and freeze all my muscles as the cockroaches inch out of their hiding places and slowly gather around the sugar for a belly-filling feast. But I wait and wait and wait, and even as I silently stand there with a twisted grin growing tighter across my face, I know this is all wrong. But doing what is wrong in this House-of-Pigza seems so right, so I don't move an inch until my lips are clown-crazy huge and can't stretch any wider without splitting open, and then I flick the light switch and it's *Game on!* The roaches take off and you can hear them chirping with fear as they skitter back to the cracks in the walls. They are fast, but so am I, and my hands slap after them like snapping bullwhips and I flatten a bunch of them. I keep a *Rubbed-Out-Roach* chart written on the inside door of the snack cabinet, which is their private clubhouse. Once I gather up the dead I give myself ten points for the big ones, five for the medium, and half a point for any babies smaller than my fingernail. I figure in a week I'll have a thousand points. I don't have a clue what this game says about me, but after playing it I find myself breathing heavily while hunched in front of the bathroom mirror making Japanese-horror-movie faces as if I'm a terrified little roach and a giant human Joey hand is going to slap the guts out of me.

Or maybe I *do* have a clue about what that game means. Special Ed had also said that everyone in the whole world has a special gift, and my special gift is that I can feel everything everyone else feels. He told me it is the most powerful gift in the world because I can feel everyone's happiness and become super happy, and he also warned me that it is the most distressing gift because I can feel everyone's sadness, and the weight of their sadness can fill me with sorrow and drop me to my knees. I sure know what he means by that because when I hear my mother weeping at night I weep too. It's hard to call weeping a gift, but then

again, when she stops crying and laughs out loud I'm never happier.

I'm just trying to get back on track and make sense of myself these days because ever since my parents split up again there is no sense in me hoping things will get better between them. All my life I've had my ups and downs because of their hit-or-miss moments. Each morning they'd roll out of bed like a pair of fuzzy dice tumbling across a game board and I never knew if they would end up even or odd or not. So while I waited for them to bounce off the walls and maybe add up to a lucky day, I'd just stand as still as a pencil drawing of a boy with my eyes X-ed out and my mouth bolted shut as if I was locked out of my own heart and had lost the key.

It's bad to fear your parents, but worse is when you fear yourself. I used to think I was getting better without my meds, but now I feel like I'm returning to the old days when I lived with my grandma. In those days I couldn't look into a mirror without my eyes spinning like carnival lights. Now those old days don't feel so old any more. This morning I looked in the mirror and my eyes were sparking, and right away I had to twist my head to one side and take a deep breath. 'Settle down, Joey,' I whispered. 'Take a time-out.' But my eyes were already flashing: *Danger zone ahead!* I mean, how can seeing me, and being me, be hurting me? How can I be the worst person in my own life? *Please, if you know the answer, do get back to me on that!*



2

MEAT CLEAVER

Dad's still gone. Mom's the boss again, and she said things aren't going to get better now that we've returned to living on the edge. But she orders pizza every night, so how bad can it be? While I wait for the pizza to arrive I dance around the kitchen singing '*O so-le mioooo*' with a pair of white pants stretched around my head like I'm that singing Italian chef on the cover of the Antonio's Pizzeria box. I love how the chef is kind of skipping through the air as he spins a crazy tornado of dough over his head like he's getting ready to serve up a stormy mozzarella with extra lightning and thunder. I tried spinning a dinner plate above my head, but I sneezed and tossed it too high and it hit the ceiling fan and got shot into the next room. It ended up under the couch like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle.

The doorbell is our dinner bell, and when it rings I yell out, 'Ding-Dog!' because my yapping Chihuahuas, Pablo and Pablita, put up more racket than two leaf blowers.

I load one dog on top of the other like stacking plastic chairs, and then hoist them onto my head. They make an excellent hat with their skinny front paws stretched under

my jaw like a chinstrap. In case you didn't know this detail about me, I like wearing hats because they keep me from pulling out my hair when I'm jumpy. The Chihuahuas have the *yaps* but I have the *yips* - the kind of crazy yips that baseball players get when they are nervous and can't throw a ball in a straight line no matter how hard they try. My yips are the hair-pulling kind. One moment I'm mindlessly scratching my nose, and then a split second later my hand yips up on a spring and plucks a single hair out of my head as if my fingernails are some kind of evil bird beak. I can't seem to stop attacking myself, so I now wear a Jewish yarmulke to keep me from pecking my own head bald. Mom gave me the yarmulke because after the miracle of Carter Junior being born she said we were going to convert to Judaism and move to the Holy Land and be closer to God. We walked to the library to find out how to be Jewish over the Internet, but it was way too complicated, so the yarmulke and a kosher dairy pizza were as far as we got. Besides, Pennsylvania is always called God's country so I figured we'd just bump into God one of these days and ask for his blessing when he toured through Lancaster.

I love answering the front door because it's always the same friendly Chinese pizza delivery guy, Mr Fong. He's learning English and becoming a citizen and is very nice because he lets me break the welfare rules and pay him in food stamps.

'Pig-zah pie!' Mr Fong announces grandly.

I taught him how to say that.

He bows, and then pulls the pizza out of the red plastic hot box that keeps it warm.

'Thank you for the Pig-zah, Mr Fong,' I say, and smile brightly. He nods, and then reaches out to pet Pablo and Pablita, who lick his hand. They love the taste of him. Mom said to keep an eye on Mr Fong because the Chinese eat dogs, but I have never seen a Pekinese pizza on the menu,

just an American pizza with sliced hot dogs and baked beans.

After I glance up and down the street for the welfare police that Mom says spy on us from parked cars, I quickly pay Mr Fong and say, 'Thank you, Mr Fong, see you tomorrow.'

He smiles and his eyes disappear as his mouth opens. 'Thank you,' Mr Fong repeats, and then he tips his flat pizza cap that looks like something you wear when you graduate from Pizzeria College. He's a fast learner.

Then the Chihuahuas and I return to the kitchen. I lean way forward and they spring off my head like kung fu fighters, then stand on their hind legs and chop at the air with their front paws as they bark and beg. I pull a slice out of the box and place it on a chipped cutting board that reminds me of Dad's scarred-up face. I wish he was still around but I don't think Mom does. He called once, and afterwards she dragged herself out of bed and went down to the butcher's shop and bought a used meat cleaver. 'For protection,' she said wickedly, and hid it under her pillow. But later I took it away and re-hid it in the freezer. Thank goodness I don't have the meat-cleaver yips and hack myself in the head because the cleaver comes in handy for chopping a slice of pizza to bits for Pablo and Pablita. If I don't madly murder it into a thousand crazy pizza slivers, the steamy dough clogs up their tiny throats and they choke, then swell up and fall over, and I have to press down on their puffy bellies with both hands as if I'm strangling a set of bleating bagpipes until the stuck wad of dough shoots out their mouths and *thwacks* against the skirting board. I don't really bother to clean it up, which is one of a hundred reasons why the Humane Society of Roaches sends us all their homeless adoptees. Once I asked Mom what the name 'Pigza' meant and she replied that it translated into 'roach' in Gypsy lingo, so it makes sense that we nourish all our little floor-friends.

Mom is a very fancy pizza gourmet and has me use scissors to cut her slice into long thin strips, which I then serve over lettuce in a bowl with Thousand Island dressing so she can eat it like pizza salad with a fork. She got that foodie recipe from Quips Pub across the street, which serves it for Sunday brunch. The only one in this house who really eats pizza like a normal Pigza is my little baby brother, Carter Pigza Junior, who doesn't have teeth yet but can power-gum an extra-cheesy slice into mush and swallow it bit by bit and wash it down with a bottle of welfare powdered milk, which for some reason is the same mustard colour that comes out of his revolving door two meals later. I love him.

While the dogs and Mom and Carter Junior eat, I use sewing scissors to trim my slices up into little family faces and arrange them on a plate like my own perfect single-size Pig-zah family. With the baby propped up on pillows next to me, I eat my pizza in front of the TV while watching reruns of *Star Trek* because I love Mr Spock. He has no emotions to get in the way of his thinking, which makes him the complete opposite of me, because my emotions always get in the way of my thinking.

After we eat and I clear Mom's bowl from the bedroom there is one perfect slice left over, but I secretly save it for Dad like it's some kind of bait in our rat-trap house. Even though he is still missing in action since he ran off six months ago, I leave the last slice untouched in the box in case he shows up hungry for a midnight snack. He's still slinking around town but he never shows his face at our door, which just means I get to share the last slice with Carter Junior in the morning. I sprinkle a little water on it and stick it in the microwave and give it a thirty-second blast of radiation and it freshens right up, as if Mr Fong had just delivered a breakfast slice at our back door.

I want to share everything with Carter Junior except for my nervous insides. I call him the 'missing link' because so