

Dinner at Blue's

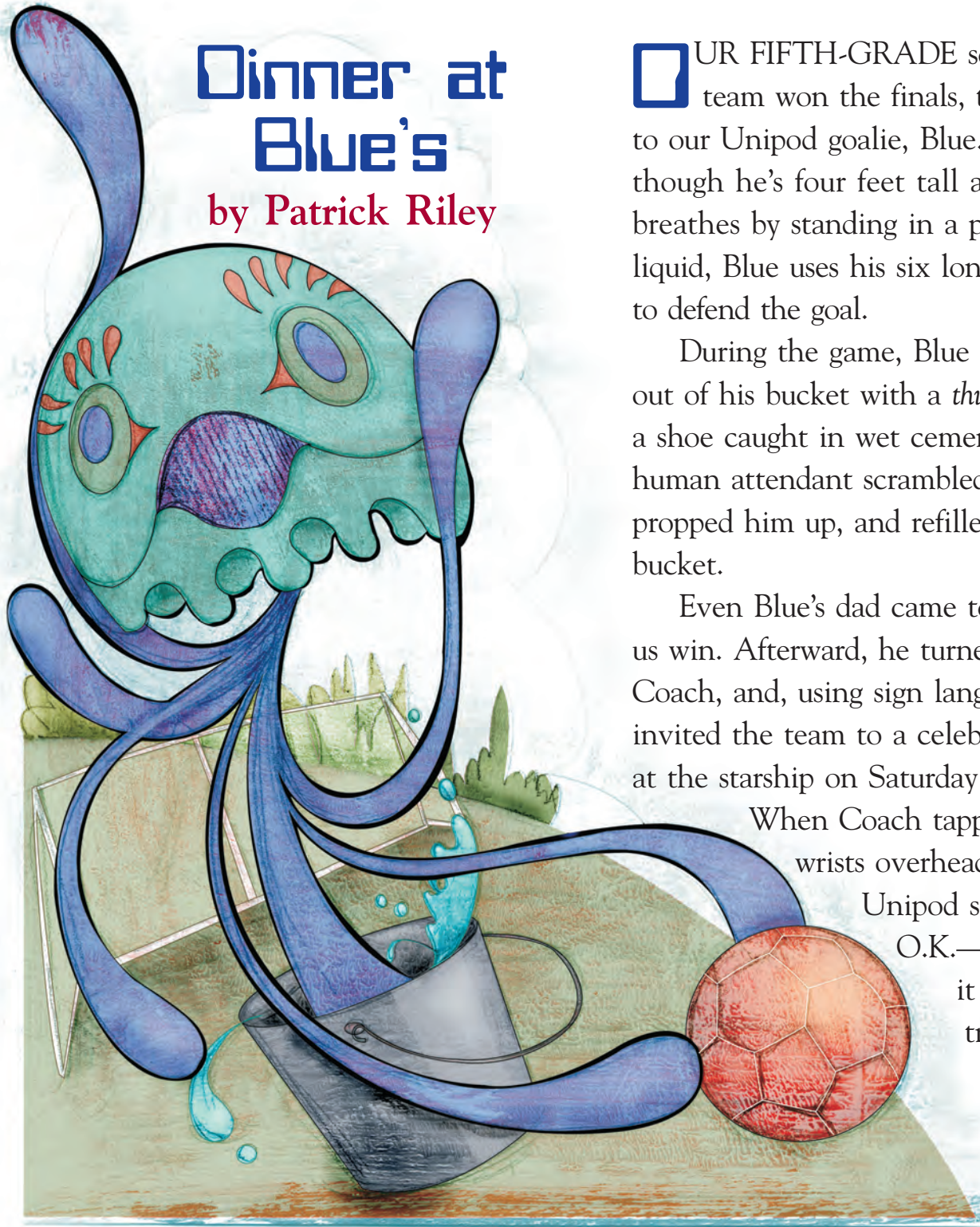
by Patrick Riley

OUR FIFTH-GRADE soccer team won the finals, thanks to our Unipod goalie, Blue. Even though he's four feet tall and breathes by standing in a pail of liquid, Blue uses his six long arms to defend the goal.

During the game, Blue toppled out of his bucket with a *thud*, like a shoe caught in wet cement. His human attendant scrambled over, propped him up, and refilled his bucket.

Even Blue's dad came to watch us win. Afterward, he turned to Coach, and, using sign language, invited the team to a celebration at the starship on Saturday night.

When Coach tapped his wrists overhead—the Unipod sign for O.K.—I knew it meant trouble.



That night at dinner, I talked to my dad about it. "He's a great goalie," I said, "but I don't want to visit Blue's starship."

"You didn't want anything to do with Blue when he first came to your school, but now he's a good friend."

I crumpled my napkin in my fist. "He's my best friend."

"The party will be fine. Give it a chance." He glanced at my uneaten vegetables, then took my plate to the sink.

I twisted sideways on my chair. "Dad, their ship is filled with water."

"So?"

"How am I going to eat dinner underwater? How do I breathe? What will they feed us?"

"Hopefully not vegetables."



Dad smiled, scraped my plate into the disposal, then buzzed it on. "I'm sure the Unipods have a solution. They've certainly had human guests before."

I leaped to my feet. "They've been traveling in outer space for a billion years. They stopped on Earth only because they spotted our blue oceans and pulled over to stretch. They've never had human guests."

When I got to school the next morning, Blue was hunched forward in his bucket, nervously braiding his arms into knots. He'd also talked to his dad and had been assured the party would be cool.

I stared into Blue's bucket. The brown water teemed with krill, tiny shrimplike things from Earth's oceans. Normally this wouldn't have grossed me out because Blue brought his lunch to school every day. But when I thought about the soccer team eating krill for dinner, I nearly threw up.

I said I wasn't sure I could come Saturday because I wasn't feeling well.

Blue tapped two of his arms above his head, but I knew he'd be disappointed.

Dad was home early the next day. "I saw Blue's father today." Dad leaned over the sink, scrubbing carrots. "He hoped you'd be feeling better by Saturday." Dad moved closer. "Still worried about Blue's party?"

I tried to walk away, but he grabbed my shoulder. "Why don't you want to go?" He stared hard at me, and I figured I'd better tell the truth.

"Dad, I can't swim. I don't even know how to drown."

Dad's face broke into a smile. He pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. "How do you think Blue feels?"

I wrinkled up my forehead. "Um . . . weren't we talking about swimming?"

BEE BOOP!
GREETINGS,
EARTHBUGS.
I'M REDIPS
FROM PLANET
ELBILLUG.



HERE WE GO

AGAIN



“Blue has traveled the cosmos, started classes at a new school, learned sign language and soccer, and tried to make friends. Now his best friend”—Dad tapped my chest—“won’t come to his party.”

I scuffed my sneaker against the floor. “Blue doesn’t want this party either. His dad is forcing him.” I glanced at the carrot-filled sink so Dad might understand Unipods weren’t the only ones forcing their

I’VE BEEN
LOST IN THE
COSMOS,
THE UNIVERSE.
CAN YOU TELL
ME THE WAY
TO SAN JOSE?



I ALSO NEED
HEART-SHAPED
SUGAR YUMMIES
AS FUEL
FOR MY SPACESHIP.

... FOR YOUR
“SPACESHIP”?



TAKE ME TO
YOUR
“SPACESHIP.”

kids to do stuff.

“Maybe Blue’s just nervous. You are his friend and teammate, and he wants you to enjoy his party.”

Dad returned to the sink. “I’ll talk to Blue’s father. He’s probably already solved this swimming thing.”

Dad had worse news Thursday night. “Apparently, Unipods naturally love the water,” Dad said. He dropped onto the couch and slapped his knee. “When his attendant translated my words, ‘Humans aren’t born knowing how to swim,’ Blue’s father nearly fainted!”

I jumped and spun in the air. “So the party’s off!”

“No, we’ve worked something out.”

My eyes must have bugged out, because Dad held up his palm. “Just tell your teammates to bring winter coats to the party.”

Dad drove me Saturday night, since he’d volunteered to help. When we pulled up to the starship

and saw its dark oval outline against the night sky, I couldn’t believe they were ready for a party.

Dad parked the truck. He carried a tray of vegetables—his



YIPE!
ALIEN!



BE NE
BEEBOOP?



WE NEED THE
ALIEN'S WORDS
TRANSLATED,
CHANGED FROM
ITS LANGUAGE
INTO OURS.



IS THAT
SPIDER
AGAIN?

contribution to the evening—and nudged me up the stairs. When a human attendant opened the hatch and we stepped inside the ship, my jaw dropped.



The Unipods had built a thick floor floating on the water and a forest of sculptures on top of that. I thought the sculptures were glass, but then I realized everything was ice. There were statues of Blue guarding the goal and me kicking the ball. Overhead, an ice banner congratulated us.

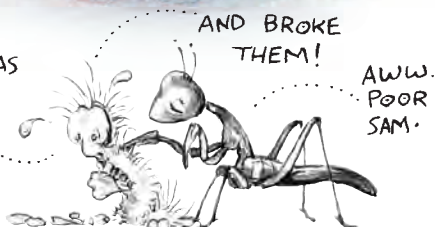
The Unipods swam and frolicked in the water beneath the ice floor, and I watched them. Unipods are awkward on land and depend on humans for help, but in the water, they're graceful. I thought that someday I might have Blue teach me to swim.

Blue was first to greet us. He slipped out of the water at the floor's edge and slid across the ice until an attendant hurried over and planted him in a nearby bucket. Blue started speaking in sign language.

Dad tapped my shoulder. "What did he say?"

I smiled. "He said welcome to my house."

HEY!
SOMEBUGGY HAS
FROLICKED,
PLAYED,
WITH MY
HEARTS....



AWW.
POOR
SAM.

A BROKEN
HEART CAN
BE SOO
PAINFUL!





Dad and I laughed, and I'm sure that inside, Blue laughed, too.

At dinner, while the humans ate hot dogs and hamburgers, the Unipods ate krill. We talked about the championship and had a great time.

When no one was looking, I walked over to Dad's untouched tray of vegetables and filled the deep, zipped pockets of my winter coat. Neither Unipods nor the soccer team liked vegetables, but, for tonight, Dad didn't need to know that. 🌟

