



SPRING FEVER

This morning, I said that. I mean, I actually heard my own voice speak those exact words. Me. Aldo Zelnick.

In case you don't know, I pretty much hate OUTSIDE, with all its FRESH AIR and physical activity and lack of cushiony places to sit down. What was I thinking?

It's a Saturday in early March, and I was talking to my best friend, Jack. We were in our fort, which is in my bedroom closet for the winter, because it's too cold here in Colorado for our outside fort underneath a big pine tree in our neighborhood.

Our closet-fort is OK. I mean, it's better than no fort at all, because forts are where kid business happens. For example: Jack and I had spent the whole morning in the closet-fort watching a super-ancient movie called *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on my mom's laptop. Anyways...

"Dude, you just said you want to go OUTSIDE," marveled Jack.

"I know. I must be having a brain attack or something. Let's go find my mom. She'll put her thermometer-hand on my head to see if I'm dying."



We rushed downstairs to the kitchen, where Mom was making bird jewelry* and Dad was stirring a kettle of something red and chunky.



"What's happenin', fellas?" Dad asked. "Pull up a stool and try my irresistible jambalaya.*"

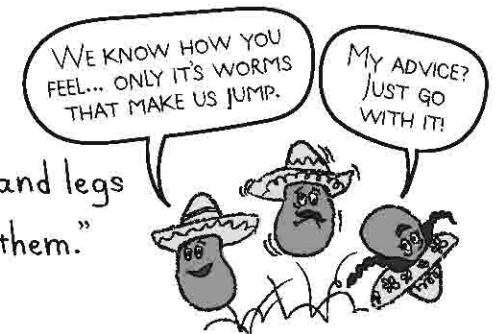
"I don't think I can eat," I said. "Something's wrong with me. See?! I just said I can't eat!"

On cue, Mom palmed my forehead. "You don't have a fever," she frowned. "Do you feel sick?"

"I feel...jittery.*"

"Jittery?"

"Yeah! Like my arms and legs have jumping beans* inside them."



"Aldo," said Dad, putting his hands on my shoulders and bending down to look me straight in the eyeballs...



"Spring fever means your body knows that spring is almost here," said Mom with an amazed grin. "Your arms and legs want to go OUTSIDE, where they can move around! I never thought I'd see this day."

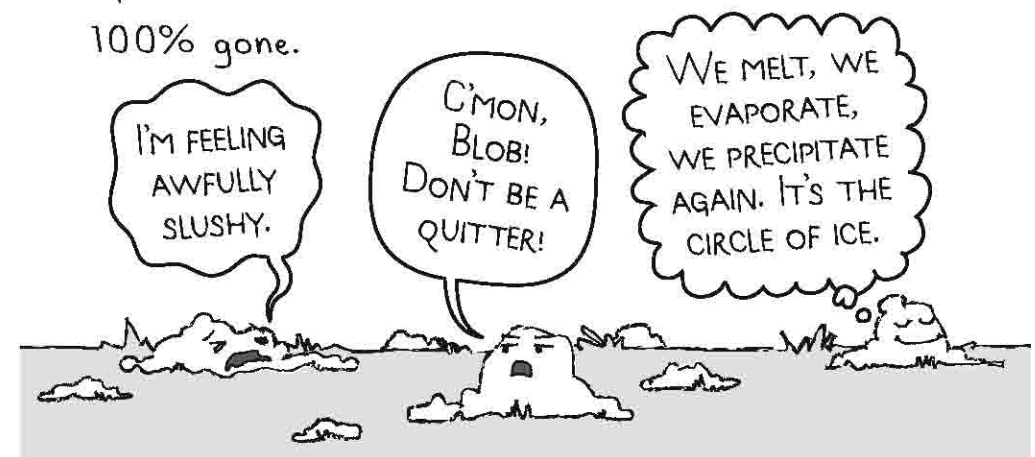
"Weird," I said. "Welp, see ya later, Jack. I'm gonna go take a nap. See if I can sleep off this spring-fever sickness."

But Jack wasn't paying attention to me. Instead, he was standing at the window, looking into my back yard. "It's sunny, and almost all the snow is melted," he noticed. "Let's go check out our fort! Our real fort!"

"Take it easy," I said. "In situations like this, the important thing is not to overreact..."

But Mom was already handing me my boots. "Wear these. It's muddy out there," she said. "Have fun!"

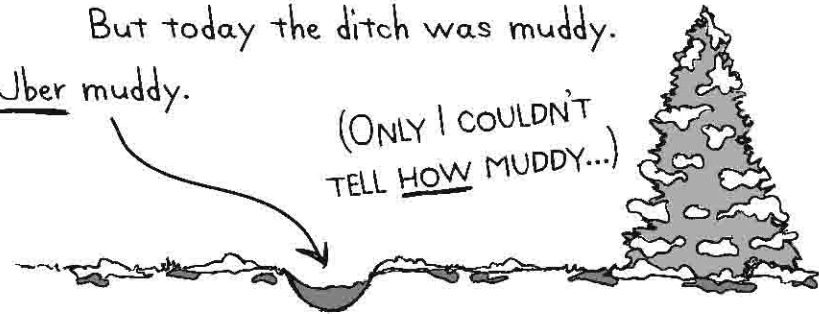
So on this spring-fever day, Jack and my dog, Max, and I trudged down the driveway, across the street, and through the soggy grass field to the giant Colorado Blue Spruce tree where we have our fort. The sky was Smurf-blue, and I could hear real birds twittering, but here and there little blobs of unmelted snow reminded us that winter wasn't 100% gone.



Our feet squished across the wet, brown grass as we got close to our fort tree. But between us and our fort was the ditch. In the summer, it's just a little grassy U that we run through without even thinking about it.



But today the ditch was muddy. Uber muddy.



And oops, I hadn't put on my boots like Mom asked me to. I was still wearing my holey shoes. Which, as it turns out, aren't the greatest in mud...

We slip-slided down to the bottom of the ditch, clambered up the far side, and were almost ditch-free when SCHLOOOP...my foot sank into the muck. Actually, my whole right leg disappeared, almost up to my knee. *No big deal*, I thought. *I'll just pull it out.*

So I pushed against the ground with my left leg, trying to tug my right leg from the muddy trap. It didn't budge. I pulled again, this time gritting my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut and asking every jumping-bean muscle in my body to use its spring-fever energy to free me from the abyss of doom, which was about to suck in my whole body and bury me alive.

When that didn't work either, I sorta panicked.

"Help me!" I cried.
"Jack, help me! My leg is trapped in quickmud! I can't move! I can't breathe! I can't live! Call 911!"

HOW IT FEELS TO BE STUCK:



Jack came running over. "In situations like this, the important thing is not to overreact," he said, tapping his pointer finger on his chin. "This looks like a schist-Gesundheit" (or something like that) "sedimentary formation, so what we probably need to do is..."

If you have a choice, don't pick a rock hound to save you when you are stuck in the earth's crust.

"Just grab me and pull!" I yelled.

So Jack stood behind me, put his arms around my waist, grabbed my belt loops, and pulled with all his scrawny might. And what do you know... Jack's 5th grade muscles must be coming in or something, because my leg started to slide from its muddy tomb...and then, *Pop!* It suctioned out, like a cartoon cork out of a cartoon bottle.



And a bunch of mud and rocks and grossness came with Jack and me, all of us sliding down to the bottom of the ditch in a slithery mess.

"We made a mudslide!" said Jack. "Cool!"

"Ughhh. You gave me a monster wedgie."

"Whoa, look at these rocks!" Jack blabbered on. "Check out this one!" And he hoisted a rock the size of a big loaf of bread.

"Yup. That's a big rock all right," I said. "And now that my spring fever is cured, I'm ready to go back inside."

So we walked back to my house, Jack carrying the rock and jabbering* the whole time about geolithic paleontological blah, blah, blah. Mom must've seen us coming, because she ran outside screaming, "Gah! Stop right there!"



She made us strip down to our undies in the cold garage (brrr! and embarrassing!), then she sent Jack to the parent bathroom and me to my bathroom to get clean.

I'm not a big hygiene guy, but I gotta admit, that hot shower felt pretty good.

Afterwards, Jack and I met back up in my bedroom. He was wearing my mom's robe, and his eyes were as round as quarters. He looked like a really surprised, really skinny jaguar.* And he was holding the rock he'd lugged home, only now it was clean. And weird-looking.

"I brought the rock into the shower with me," he whispered. "And it isn't a cool rock after all. It's a cool fossil. And it's not just a cool fossil...I think it might be...a dinosaur bone."



"Nuh-uh," I scoffed. "Dinosaurs didn't live in our neighborhood."

"Yes, uh-huh!" said Jack. "Dinosaur fossils have been discovered all over Colorado!"

"Really?" That's when an idea jumpstarted* my brain. "Hey! Are dinosaur bones worth something?"

"Dinosaur fossils are priceless!" cried Jack. "They're glimpses into our planet's past! Treasures from ancient history!"

"Not that kind of 'worth something'! I mean, how much could we get for that bone on eBay?"

"Oh!" said Jack, his mouth a cave of surprise. "I don't know. There are a bunch of laws about who fossils belong to and whether or not you can keep them... It depends on who owns the land where the fossils are found..."

"Tell ya what," I said. "Let's keep this bone-rock a secret until we figure out for sure what it is. OK? I'll go get my mom's laptop so you can do some rock-hound research..."

But just then we heard my brother, Timothy, jouncing* down the hallway, toward my room. Real quick I stashed the fossil inside my mountain of a dirty clothes pile.



By the time we finished eating (I thought the jambalaya was yumbo, but Jack said he's not ready to eat food with more than 3 ingredients yet, so he had a peanut-butter sandwich), Jack's mom was there to pick him up. So the secret fossil is still wrapped like a mummy inside my used underwear, where it'll be nice and safe until Jack comes back tomorrow and we can figure out just how rich we're gonna be.

