

**EVERY WEEKDAY MORNING,
12-YEAR-OLD GILAH TAKES THE SAME
PUBLIC BUS TO HER SCHOOL IN WASHINGTON,
DC, AND THIS YEAR, SHE'S FINALLY ALLOWED TO
RIDE ALONE. ON THE VERY FIRST DAY, THE
BUS SWERVES TOO CLOSE TO A BICYCLIST,
AND GILAH FINDS THE COURAGE TO ALERT THE
DRIVER TO STOP THE BUS. WITHOUT A BIKE,
13-YEAR-OLD GUILLERMO STARTS RIDING THE
H4 WITH GILAH. THIS IS THE STORY OF A
SALVADORAN-AMERICAN BOY WHO IS A POET,
A NEURODIVERSE JEWISH GIRL WHO LOVES
BREAKDANCING, AND HOW THEY NAVIGATE
THE DETOURS OF THEIR FAMILIES, THEIR
FRIENDSHIP, AND THEIR LIVES.**

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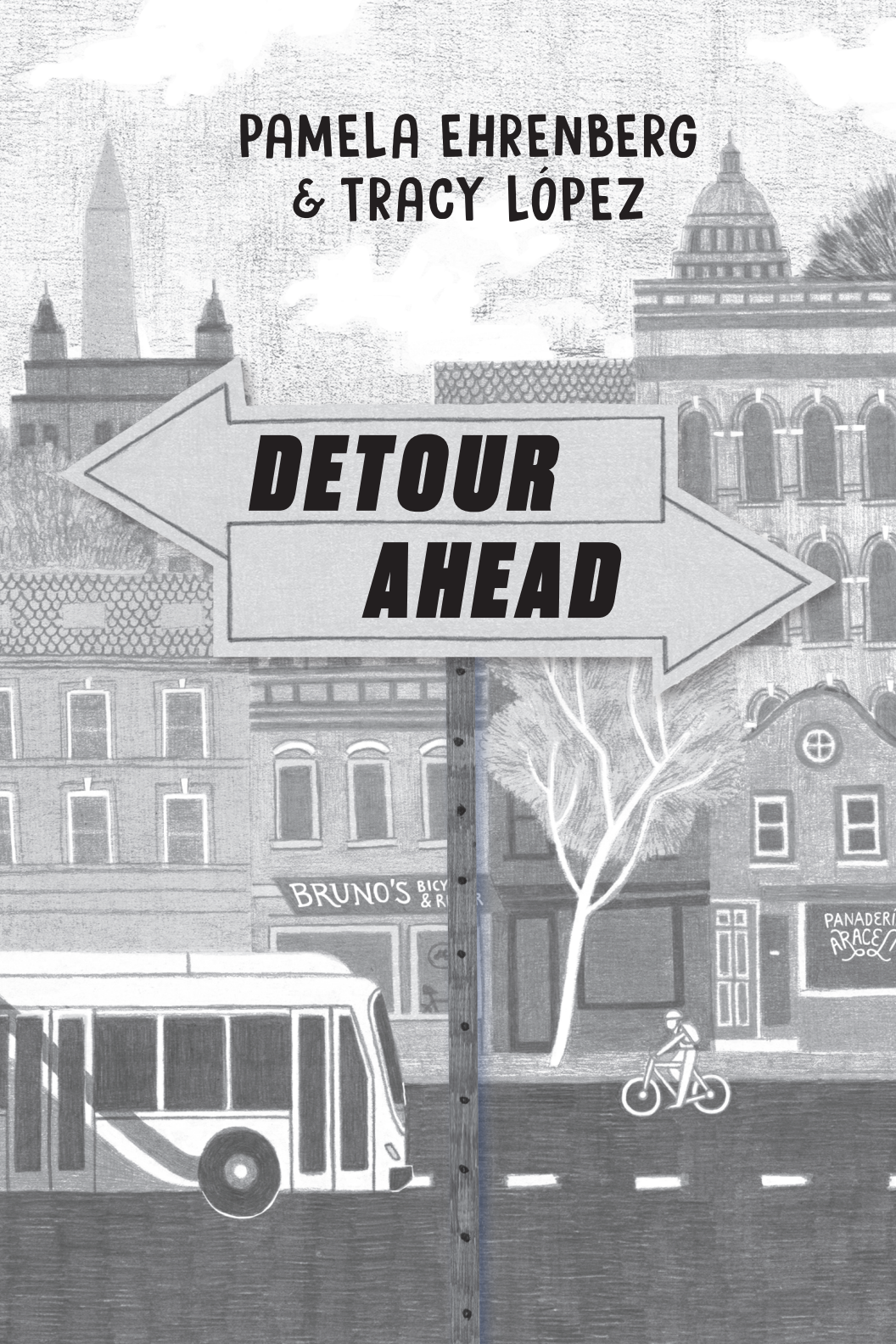




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***DETOUR
AHEAD***



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GILAH

BUS STOP

This is the corner of Porter Street and Connecticut Avenue Northwest: a regular, ordinary street corner in Washington, DC, where I wait every morning for the regular, ordinary Metrobus that takes me to my school. The part that is not ordinary is that my mom is not waiting here with me like she did at the beginning of the school year, because as of today I am allowed to take the bus by myself.

I'm at the corner early, with my eyes glued in the direction the bus will be coming from, so I can't possibly miss it even if my mind is thinking of other things. Here are some of the things I am thinking about:

- breakdancing moves
- music that is good for breakdancing
- the Hebrew I am studying for my bat mitzvah coming up—and which of the letters look most like breakdancing moves.

I am not thinking about my mom smiling and taking pictures from the window of our house, which she will probably text to my dad at work as soon as I get on the bus. Even though my mom always tells me not to take pictures at the wrong time, she keeps taking pictures of me that I don't like—I think she forgets that I'm not five. If the bus thing goes well, she is starting a new job next week, the first one since my sister Miri was born. I don't know whether we'll cheer and take pictures of her leaving for work.

I've been waiting for six minutes when my sister Miri comes outside and crosses the street for her bus, which is also a regular, ordinary Metrobus but filled mostly with kids from her middle school. The rainbow peace sign key chain on her backpack is what's called a visual cue that she is still eleven. As in, one and a half years younger than me. As in, people my age think they are too old for a key chain like that. It is not a visual cue having to do with actual peacefulness, as anyone would know if they heard Miri this morning when the tie-dye shirt that she needed right that second for school spirit day happened to be in the wash.

Her bus goes the opposite direction from mine. Sometimes I wonder if we are going opposite ways from each other even when we're not on the bus.

My brother Asher goes to a regular high school, except it is not very regular that he gets there at seven thirty in the morning for chess club.

Miri's bus comes first, like we practiced.

My bus comes second, like we practiced.

I am facing the right direction so I'm sure to notice when it comes, just like we practiced.

Except for one thing that is not like we practiced.



The bus to my school says “H4” on the front. *Not in service* means the bus is broken—not breaking like dancing, but broken

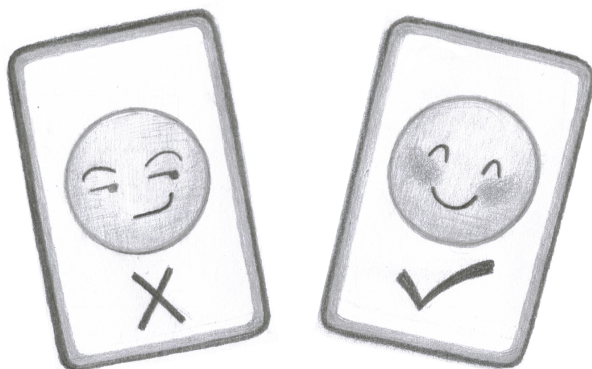
like maybe the engine might overheat or a wheel is about to fall off. It's probably going someplace to get fixed, which is not my school because I'm pretty sure no one there knows how to fix buses.

This bus is filled with regular people, just like the H4. But it doesn't say "H4," it says "Not In Service."

People are crowding around me, pushing to get on the NOT IN SERVICE bus. In case they didn't see the sign in capital-letter lights, I yell (also in capital letters), "THIS BUS IS NOT IN SERVICE."

A few people smile as they keep pushing on.

My brother Asher tried to teach me about smiling by making two flash cards that didn't really work.



But when people are moving and smiling at the same time, it's hard to get a good look before you have to look away or else

you will be staring. I didn't tell Asher that his flash cards weren't actually that helpful because I didn't want him to feel bad after he'd gone to all that trouble.

In any case, whether these people on the bus are smiling to be my friend or smiling to be jerks who are not worth my time, I really don't want a new friend right now, I want the H4 bus to take me to my school.

"You're blocking the door," says the driver, which is a fact but not an instruction because he hasn't said where he wants me to be instead.

"You're blocking the door!" he says louder, like I didn't hear him the first time.

"IT'S NOT IN SERVICE!" I shout back, in case it's Say Obvious Things Loudly for No Reason Day.

"The sign's broken," the driver says. "You see the bus is in service, so get on or stop blocking the door."

Actually, I didn't see the bus is in service, because I didn't look under the hood, and even if I did, I wouldn't know what to look for. But if *he* has inside information that the bus is in service, that would have been helpful to share at the beginning. Way more helpful than shouting about me blocking the door without saying what he wants me to do instead.

I climb on and tap my DC One card on the fare box.

“Sheesh,” I hear someone say as I walk back to find a seat.

Maybe they were sheesh-ing me, but I think we all should be sheesh-ing the driver: why did he have to make things complicated by waiting to mention the sign was wrong?

WINDOW

Filling up seats on a bus is like a video game where each person sits one at a time in the two-seaters until there's a person in every two-seater and then the aisle seats start getting filled. When my mom and I did our practice rides, I asked why she didn't sit in front of me or behind me, so she explained that the rules change if you get on with someone you know.

One rule that does not change is that the poles are only for helping people stay balanced in case there is not a seat available while the bus is moving (or possibly the only seat available is in the back, so people may need to walk down the aisle while the bus is moving). It is not OK to use the poles for a breakdancing routine like I've seen people do on YouTube because it is not safe to breakdance on a moving bus.

The plexiglass window feels cool and kind of relaxes that

side of my head. Sometimes, when I have to do something hard at school—the kind of thing that can make my brain hurt enough to have a meltdown—I press my head against something cool and imagine I’m on the bus with the cool window.

Some examples of things that are on the other side of the window are:

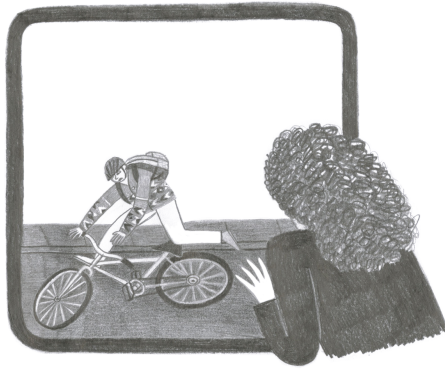
- houses
- parked cars
- the bank that gives me ten dollars each year
in their summer reading program
- a man playing guitar next to a bucket where
people throw money

Basically, regular stuff.

Until something happens outside the window that is the opposite of regular.

The bus passes just a few inches from a boy in a many-colored jacket who is riding a bike. He falls off and lands between two parked cars.

He does not get up right away, which could mean he is hurt really badly, even though he is wearing a helmet, because helmets are not magic, and people do not usually stop riding their bike in



the middle of traffic and decide to lie down for a nap, because that would not be safe, even with a helmet. And also, he is wearing a backpack (which is now sort of on top of his many-colored coat), which probably means he is going to school.

If he is lying down on the road between two parked cars instead of riding his bicycle like he was a second ago, there is a good chance he is hurt.

“Someone fell off a bike!” I yell. When no one answers, I yell again, in capital letters, “SOMEONE FELL OFF A BIKE!”

STOP

“SOMEONE FELL OFF A BIKE!”

I don’t know how many times I yell. Sometimes it is OK to yell, such as at a football game and when someone is bleeding.

We are not at a football game, but I don't know if someone is bleeding. When I've fallen off my bike, sometimes I am bleeding and sometimes not.

The boy's jacket has all kinds of colors on it. He is like Joseph in the many-colored coat, which is a story in the Torah that I am studying for my bat mitzvah. Joseph's coat had blood on it, adding to its many colors. I can't tell if this boy's coat has blood added to it or not.

The bus stops.

The bus is not supposed to stop in the middle of the street.

But the bus is not supposed to keep going when someone is hurt.

I hate when the two things that are not supposed to happen are the opposite of each other. That makes my whole body feel like it's stopped too, just like the bus, even though I know my heart is still beating.

I am going to be late to school.

I look around to see who is in charge.

The bus driver is in charge of driving the bus.

The passengers are in charge of riding to school or work.

No one is in charge of helping a boy who fell off a bike.

I see that the people around me are looking around too. It's

a nice feeling to see everyone doing what I am already doing, rather than me trying to be more like them.

“I’ll see if he’s OK,” says a man across the aisle. I wonder if he is a doctor—in which case, he should have gotten off the bus sooner. Maybe he is new at being a doctor and forgot at first that he is the one who’s supposed to help.

As the maybe doctor gets off the bus, the boy sits up and looks around. He is not covered with blood. The maybe doctor does not take any doctor things out of his bag.

The boy stands up, leans on his bike, and removes his helmet. If he is standing, he is not badly hurt, but if he is leaning, he might be a little bit hurt. I notice his hair is dark and neat like from a comb, not messed up at all from falling off his bike, except for a piece that sticks up a little in the back, but that might be a cowlick, which is a piece that always sticks up. I don’t know, because I’m only seeing him right now and didn’t see him before he fell off his bike.

SMILE

After the man gets off the bus, the driver grumbles about what will probably happen. “He’ll probably make something up. Probably call Metro. Now I gotta call this in. This could take a while.”

Sometimes when someone gets hurt at school, someone else says that they are making it up for attention, but usually that is not true. I hope this boy is OK.

It would be nice to know, like this bus driver seemed to, when someone might probably make something up.

It would also be nice if the driver said who he would probably call, such as the people at the Metrobus office. I like when things are specific.

One after another, people get off to catch another bus. Some people are shaking their heads. But I stay in my seat. I get off at the corner with the Five Below store and the T&D Bank. No place else. That's how I get to school.

Not many people are left on the bus now, just me and the driver and a guy wearing headphones. Someone else is outside the bus, though: the boy who fell off his bike.

He's on the sidewalk, looking through the bus windows with his hands cupped around his eyes. I don't know why.

He's walking along the side of the bus, but he stops when he gets to the window next to my seat. He looks at me and smiles, for some reason.

But the rule is that if another kid smiles at you—if they are not smiling to be a jerk who is not worth your time, and if

they are not a grown-up you don't know, who has no reason to smile at an almost-teenager and their smile does not make you uncomfortable—then it is nice to smile back. So I do.

That's when he mouths, "Thank you."

When someone says, "Thank you," the answer is sometimes, "You're welcome." Although sometimes the right answer is "No problem," if you are under twenty or "My pleasure," if you are twenty-one or older. (The year I am exactly twenty, I will just hope no one thanks me for anything.) I mouth, "You're welcome," back to him before I start to wonder if I should have picked one of the other answers instead.