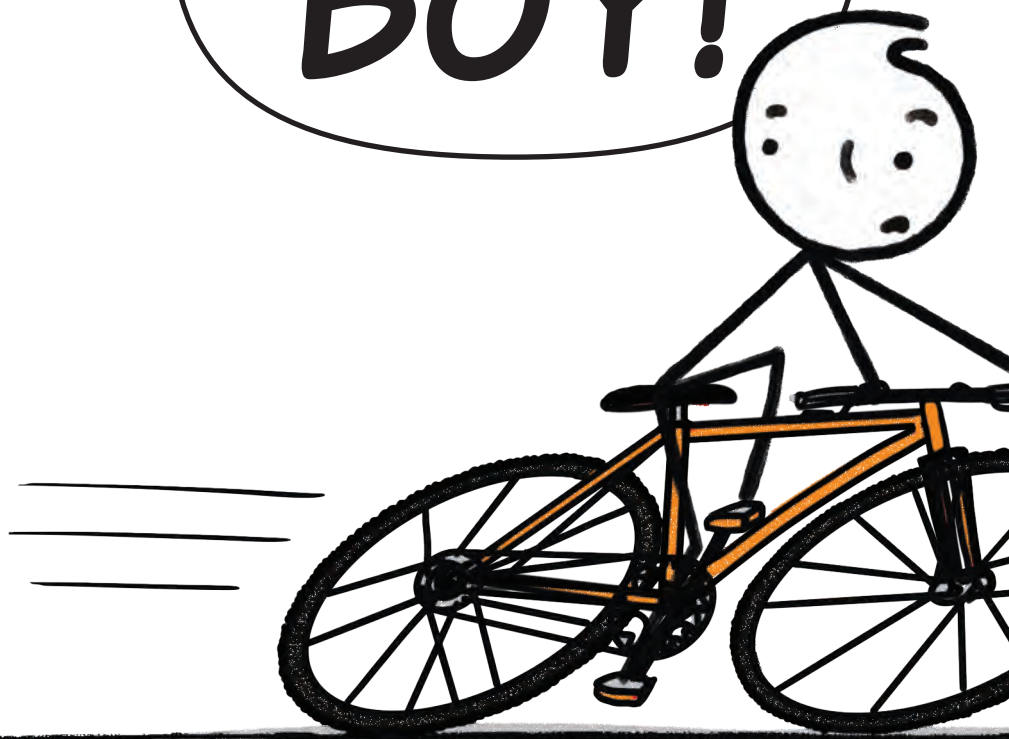


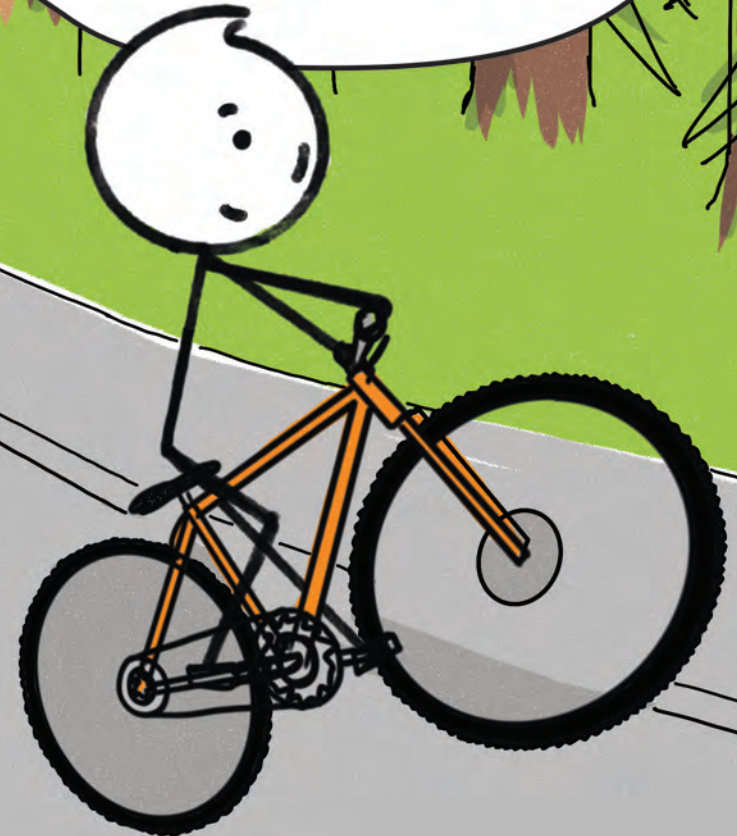
OI!

**STICK
BOY!**





STICK
BOY!



To my amazing (and growing) family.

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LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

1

A SHINY NEW THING

GRAND
REOPENING
TODAY

STICK!

← MEGA MALL GRAND REOPENING TODAY!



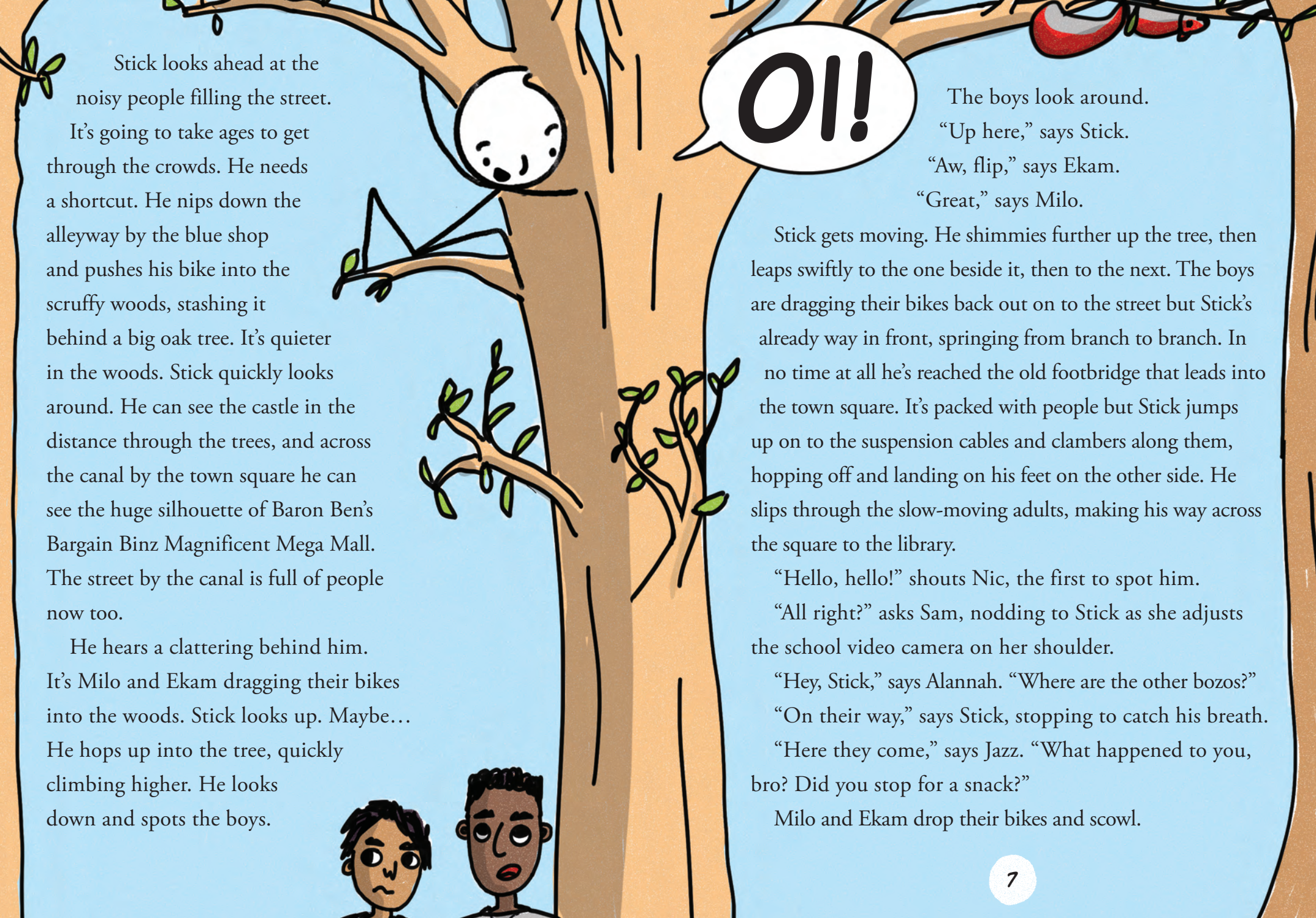
“We’re gonna catch you!” yells one of the boys chasing him.

“STICK! You’re not getting away from us this time!” roars the other.

Stick pedals faster. He races down Shop Street, zooming past the closed-down clothes shops and whizzing by the boarded-up bookseller. He looks back at the boys chasing him. That’s Ekam and Milo, his mates.



Where are they all racing to? What are all these other people doing here? And why are you asking so many questions? Let’s just watch what happens, shall we?



Stick looks ahead at the noisy people filling the street.

It's going to take ages to get through the crowds. He needs a shortcut. He nips down the alleyway by the blue shop and pushes his bike into the scruffy woods, stashing it behind a big oak tree. It's quieter in the woods. Stick quickly looks around. He can see the castle in the distance through the trees, and across the canal by the town square he can see the huge silhouette of Baron Ben's Bargain Binz Magnificent Mega Mall. The street by the canal is full of people now too.

He hears a clattering behind him. It's Milo and Ekam dragging their bikes into the woods. Stick looks up. Maybe... He hops up into the tree, quickly climbing higher. He looks down and spots the boys.

OI!

The boys look around.

"Up here," says Stick.

"Aw, flip," says Ekam.

"Great," says Milo.

Stick gets moving. He shimmies further up the tree, then leaps swiftly to the one beside it, then to the next. The boys are dragging their bikes back out on to the street but Stick's already way in front, springing from branch to branch. In no time at all he's reached the old footbridge that leads into the town square. It's packed with people but Stick jumps up on to the suspension cables and clammers along them, hopping off and landing on his feet on the other side. He slips through the slow-moving adults, making his way across the square to the library.

"Hello, hello!" shouts Nic, the first to spot him.

"All right?" asks Sam, nodding to Stick as she adjusts the school video camera on her shoulder.

"Hey, Stick," says Alannah. "Where are the other bozos?"

"On their way," says Stick, stopping to catch his breath.

"Here they come," says Jazz. "What happened to you, bro? Did you stop for a snack?"

Milo and Ekam drop their bikes and scowl.

“We had to go all the way round the park,” says Ekam, out of breath. “There are millions of people everywhere!”

“And Mr Boy here found himself a sneaky shortcut,” says Milo, frowning and panting.

“Is that cheating?” asks Nic. “Did you perhaps establish some rules before the race?”

Milo and Ekam look at each other.

“Then I declare Stick the winner,” says Nic.

“Give the man his prize!”



Milo opens his bag and pulls out a copy of *Super Boy 7: The Octobot Plot*.

Jazz laughs. "That's the prize? Nerds."

Stick smiles. "Number seven? Awesome, thank you!"

"Can I have it back when you've finished?" asks Milo.

"Of course," says Stick. "I—"

He stops and looks up, his words drowned out by the *chukka-chukka-chukka* of a massive helicopter hovering into view above the square. Sam points the camera skywards, and everyone watches as Baron Ben's chopper slowly descends and lands on top of the Mega Mall.

"That's one way to make an entrance," shouts Milo.

"So ridiculous," says Alannah. "He lives, like, a ten-minute walk from here."

The kids watch from the library steps. The Mega Mall is shrouded in a massive purple velvet curtain. It's been closed and hidden from view ever since the fiasco with the HomeBots, but for weeks now the Baron has been advertising The Mega Mall Grand Re-Opening (with SOMETHING for EVERYONE). Stick and his friends and literally every

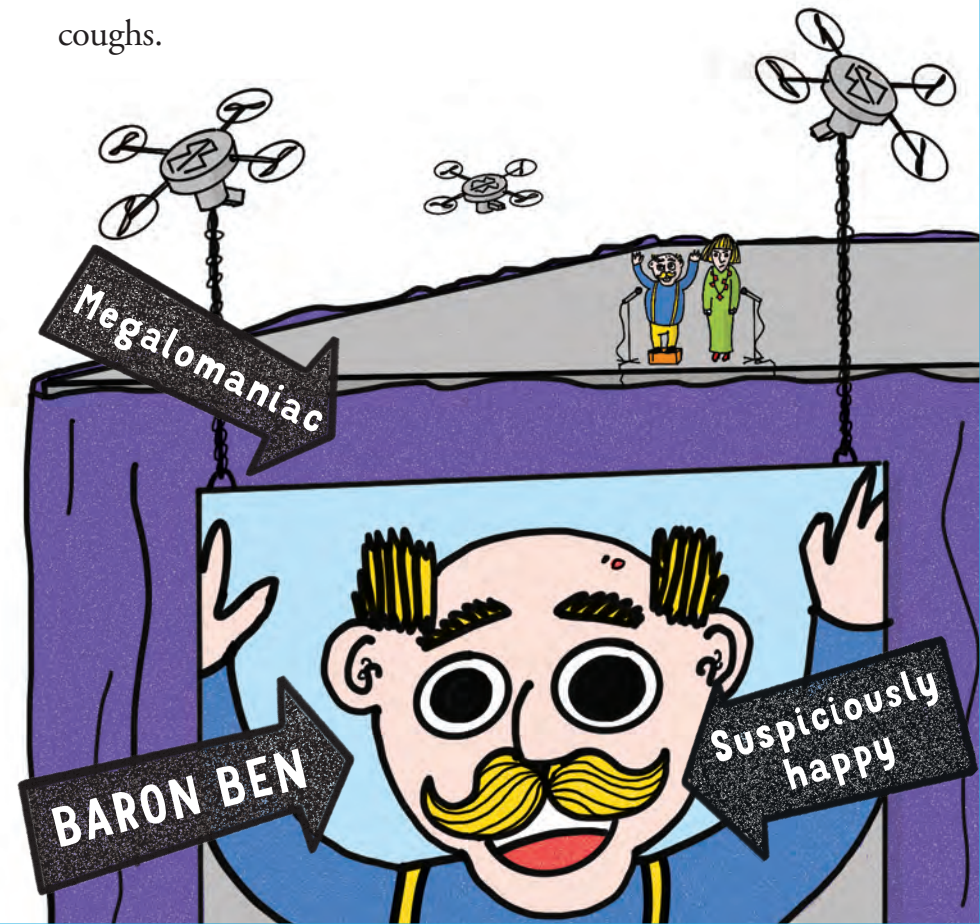


citizen of Little Town has shown up in the town square to see what the Baron's been working on. There's not a lot else to do on a Saturday in the little town called Little Town.

The crowd watches as the Baron climbs out of his helicopter and jogs to the microphone at the edge of the roof. Mrs Ben stands beside him, looking less than pleased.

"GREETINGS, CITIZENS!" shouts the Baron. "Welcome! On this glorious day for Little Town, welcome!"

Out in the bay, a seagull squawks. Someone in the crowd coughs.



The Baron grins and looks down on the crowd. “Ahem. I realize that some of you are understandably still not completely, one hundred per cent happy about what happened with the HomeBots. I am here, in person, to *personally* assure you that I had nothing to do with that unfortunate business and that any unfortunate goings-on are now behind us. Believe me when I say that I am sorry that you feel bad about what happened.”

“Yeah, right,” says Milo.

“Today is a new day!” shouts the Baron. “A new beginning! With NEW THINGS!”

“Here we go,” says Ekam.

“Today I am announcing a *new* product that will deliver *all-new* experiences and all kinds of *new* entertainment! And here, to introduce you all to this brand-new thing, allow me to introduce ... *JONNY VIDWIRE!*”

The crowd goes wild. There are screams and yells and people fainting and dogs barking and tears and declarations of love. Sam pans the camera over the scene. Jonny Vidwire emerges from the helicopter and takes the mic.

“HEY HEY HEY, LITTLE TOWN SHOPPERS! Heeeeere’s JONNY!” He grins as the screams continue, loving the attention.

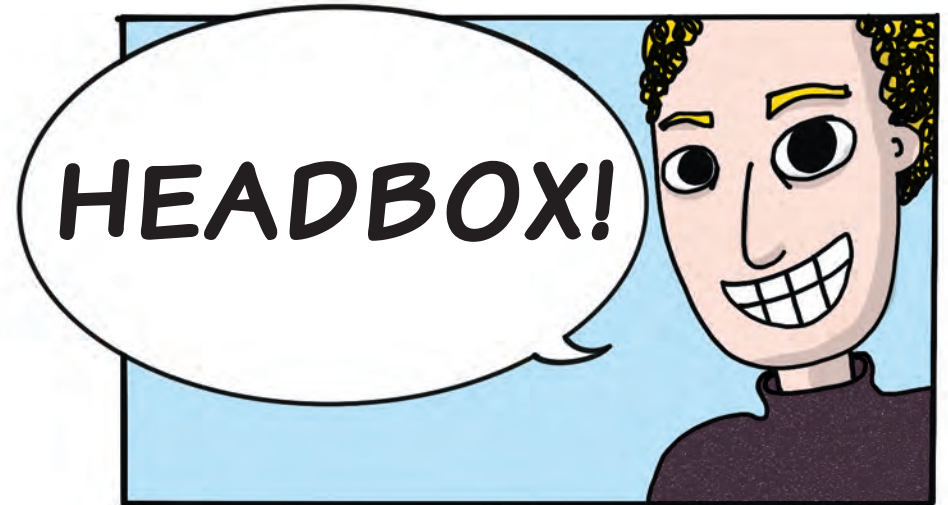
“This guy,” says Milo. “What does he even do?”

“Besides running the world’s biggest video-sharing platform?” asks Jazz.

“And consistently writing and performing catchy chart-topping pop songs that everyone loves?” asks Alannah.

As if on cue, a group of men near the front of the crowd starts singing last week’s Jonny Vidwire hit, *Baby I Love That You Love Me Baby* and another group belts out the chorus to this week’s hit, *Darling Don’t Skip My Ads No More*. The kids look at each other and sigh.

“HEY HEY HEY, thank you, thank you, thank you!” shouts Jonny over the singing. “But today isn’t about me – it’s about *you*.” He points into the crowd and a woman promptly faints. “You, the good, honest, entertainment-loving citizens of Little Town. You deserve better. You deserve the best. You deserve ...”



And with that, there's a boom and a flash of pyrotechnics and Jonny launches into song.

*"HeadBox bay-bay! I love my HeadBox,
I put it on my head, yeah, my HeadBox rocks!
HeadBox bay-bay! I'm your HeadBox,
Put me on bay-bay, yeah, I'm better than socks!"*

"His songwriting is on point, as ever," says Alannah.

There's a massive, explosive *pop*, and the gigantic velvet curtains surrounding the Mega Mall fall to the ground, revealing the brand-new building behind. Only...

"That doesn't look like the Mega Mall," says Stick.

Towering above the square, ten storeys high, is a sleek glass building. On the front above the door is the Baron's logo and that's it. Nothing else. It looks like a massive posh fridge, but made of glass with a tiny door at the bottom.

"*Boring*," says Nic. But as he speaks, the whole front of the building becomes a giant screen, showing the Baron's face.

A pre-recorded video begins to play.

"Introducing ... HEADBOX! Are you tired of going into the same old room to watch TV? Tired of having to turn your head when you want to *look* at a TV? Then HEADBOX is the thing you need!"



The whole crowd stares at the screen, entranced, as a smiling actor takes a HeadBox out of its sleek white packaging and places it on her head. She taps the side of the box and a light on the front glows a soft blue. Her muffled voice can be heard from inside. "This is awesome!"

"But it's not just for TV!" continues the Baron. "Play your favourite games using *GloveBox!*"

The actor holds up her hands, now encased in sleek white boxes, and the screen changes to show a series of games. "*Sweetie Smash! Insect Intersection! Dots Thing! Farm Town! Soccer Manager!*"

"And there's even more! Experience the world like never

before! Experience VidWire videos and concerts in total three-sixty – like you’re really there! Or go even further and experience the feeling of *being on stage* – see the world through the eyes of

Jonny Vidwire!”

“That actually sounds all right,” says Alannah.

*“Shrink yourself to the size of an electron
and fly through computer circuits!”*

“That sounds pretty cool,” says
Jazz.

*“Become a virtual architect! Build
whole worlds!”*

“Whoa!” says Nic.

“Draw in 3D! Paint in 3D!”

Stick watches, curious now.

The Baron continues, his moustachioed face filling the screen again. “But there’s more! Introducing ... *SippyCoinz!* Earn coinz as you play and watch and read and create! Exchange your coinz for SippyShakez and other goodies!”

“This is intense,” says Milo.

“But wait!” shouts the Baron again.



“THERE’S *MORE!*” He points up to where the real Baron is standing on the roof of the HeadBox Store.

“More?” asks Ekam. “This is a lot already.”

“It’s definitely a lot of shouting,” says Stick.

“Citizens of Little Town,” shouts the Baron. “The HeadBox. A marvel of modern technology. Made *right here* in Little Town and sold *exclusively* at the world’s only HeadBox Store. And as a thank you for being my loyal customers, you will be the very first people in the world to experience the HeadBox. Starting Monday, my DeliveroBots will visit every home in Little Town and give each citizen of Little Town their very own HeadBox. A gift, from me to you. From me.”

The crowd goes wild again, whooping and clapping.

“Man, people *love* free stuff,” says Sam.

“It does look pretty cool,” says Stick. “Even if the Baron is an evil megalomaniac.”

Above the noise of the cheering crowd, the Baron keeps talking. “Thank you, thank you – really, it’s the least I can do. And while I have you, please remember to come out and vote for me in next week’s mayoral election!”

“Hmmm,” says Ekam. “What election?”

The *chukka-chukka-chukka* of the helicopter starts up again and Jonny Vidwire’s HeadBox song blasts out over the square

as the chopper takes off. All around them people are chatting excitedly.

“I think it’s awesome,” says Nic. “I’m gonna create some amazing worlds. I’ll be the best HeadBox architect ever.”

“No doubt, Nic,” says Ekam. “Those games look decent too.”

“Aren’t you lot even a *bit* suspicious?” asks Milo. “I mean, the Baron did orchestrate a massive and sophisticated evil scheme against us not that long ago. Why would he suddenly give away all this awesome tech?”

“Dunno,” says Stick. “People do change.”

“That is true,” says Sam, packing away the video camera. “But a bit of scepticism wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Scepticism?” says Jazz.

“Like doubt,” says Milo. “As in I doubt that the Baron is just being lovely and generous – this is all probably part of some big, evil plan. You know it’s fishy business if the Baron is involved.”

“Let’s see...” says Stick, thinking about the possibilities of drawing in 3D. “If it’s half as good as advertised, it’s gonna be pretty awesome. I guess we’ll find out on Monday!”