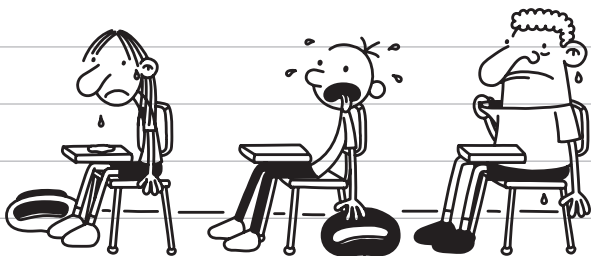
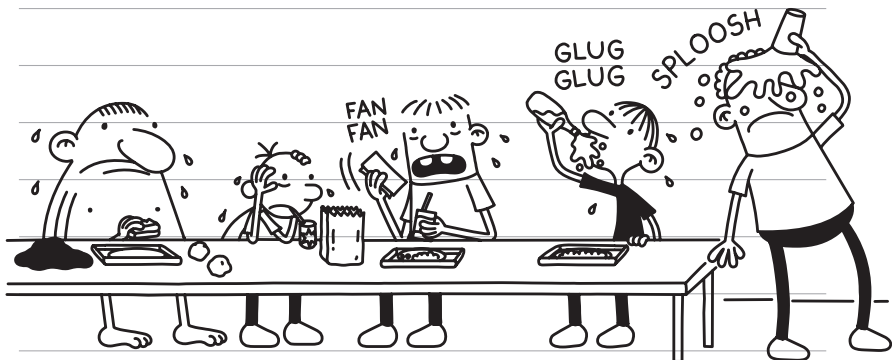


Speaking of UNUSUALLY HOT WEATHER, right now, I'm just trying to get through middle school. And the last few days haven't been all that great.

Even though it's warm outside, the thermostat at school still thinks it's WINTER. So the furnace is on full blast all day, which makes it hard to concentrate in class.



And it's worse in the CAFETERIA, because there aren't any windows you can open to get fresh air.



The heat has been frying my brain, and I've been forgetting when my school assignments are due. I forgot a really BIG one today, which was my country project for the International Showcase.

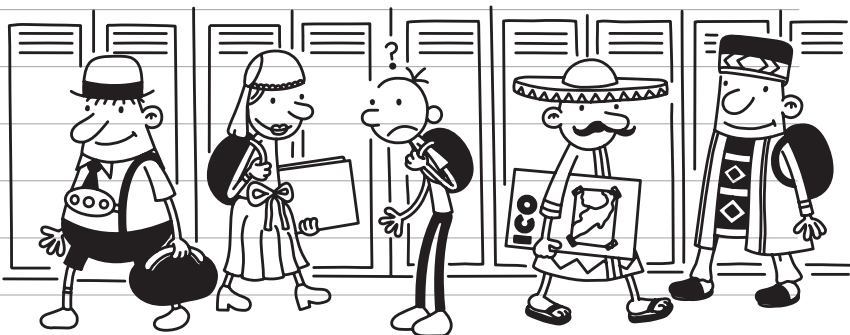
Back in November, everyone had to choose a country to do a report on. I picked Italy, because I'm a HUGE pizza fan.

But it turns out Italy was a really popular choice, so my Social Studies teacher had to do a random drawing to decide who got it. And she chose Dennis Tractor, which isn't fair because he's lactose intolerant and can't even eat cheese.

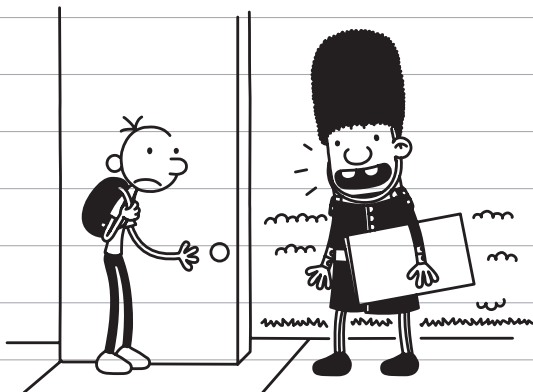


So the teacher assigned me Malta, which I didn't even know was a country.

Anyway, that was two months back, and I didn't give my country project a second thought until TODAY. And the only reason I remembered was because when I got to school, everybody was wearing weird clothes.

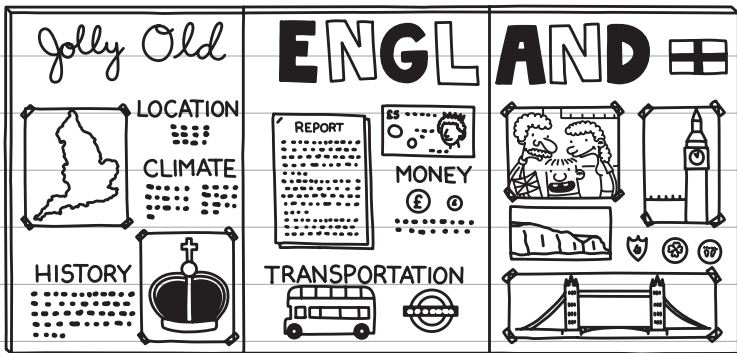


I probably should've realized it was International Showcase day when my friend Rowley came by to get me for school wearing a crazy getup. But he's ALWAYS doing strange stuff, so I barely even noticed.



In homeroom, I took a look at Rowley's project to see how much work was involved, and that's when I started to panic.

His report looked like it took a TON of time, and it was pretty obvious his parents helped him with it. Of course Rowley had actually BEEN to the country he got assigned, so I'm sure that made it a lot EASIER for him.

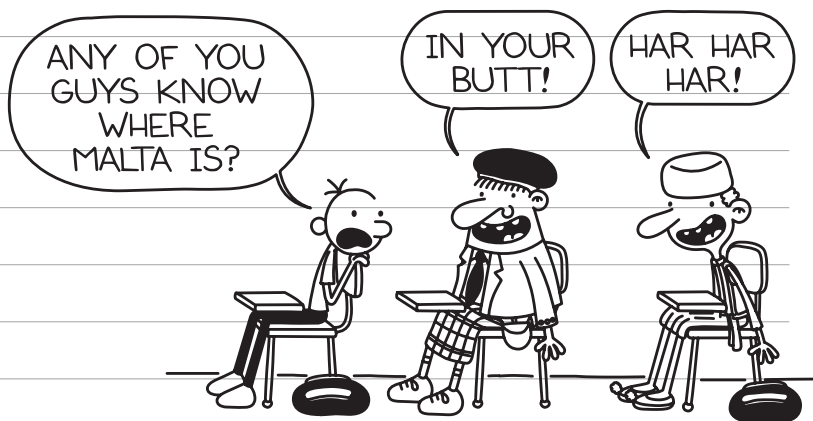


I asked Rowley to be a pal and switch countries with me, but he's kind of selfish, so he wouldn't go for it. That meant I was on my own, and I only had a few hours to do my whole project from SCRATCH. And I didn't know WHERE I was gonna find a tri-fold this late in the game.

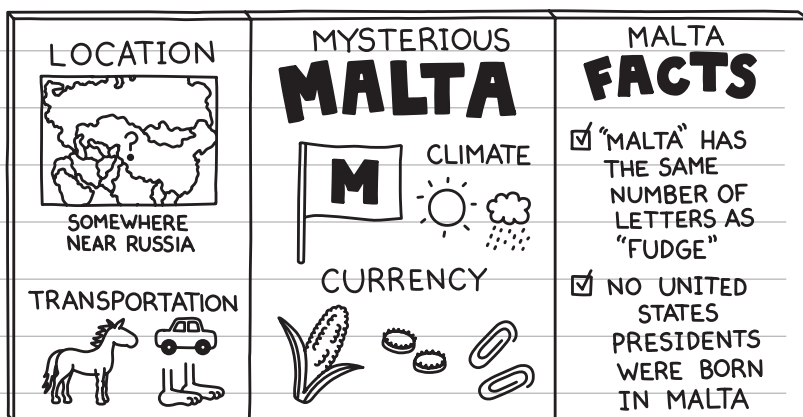
That's when I remembered that I had a tri-fold in my LOCKER. I had started my country project the day after it was assigned so I could get ahead of things for once. But when I pulled it out to see how FAR I'd gotten, I was pretty disappointed.



This project was 50% of my Social Studies grade, so I was desperate. I tried getting help from my CLASSMATES, but all THAT did was remind me I need to get some smarter friends.



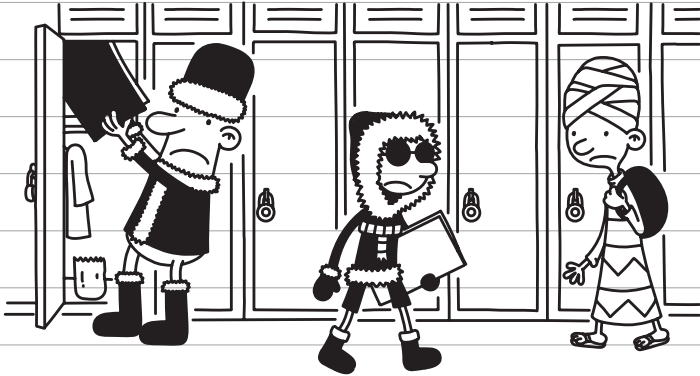
I stayed indoors for recess to work on my project. I didn't have time to go down to the library for research, so I had to do a lot of GUESSING. The only thing I felt pretty sure about was that Malta was near Russia, but I was shaky on everything ELSE.



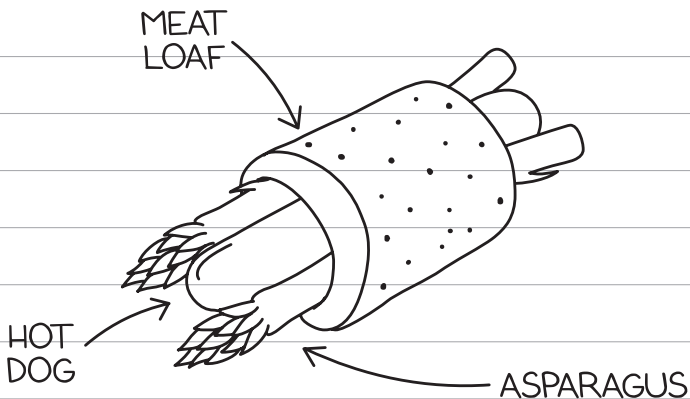
Once I finished filling out my tri-fold, I started working on the OTHER stuff.

We were supposed to wear our country's "traditional dress" for the International Showcase, so on the way to lunch I picked out some clothes from the Lost and Found in front of the principal's office.

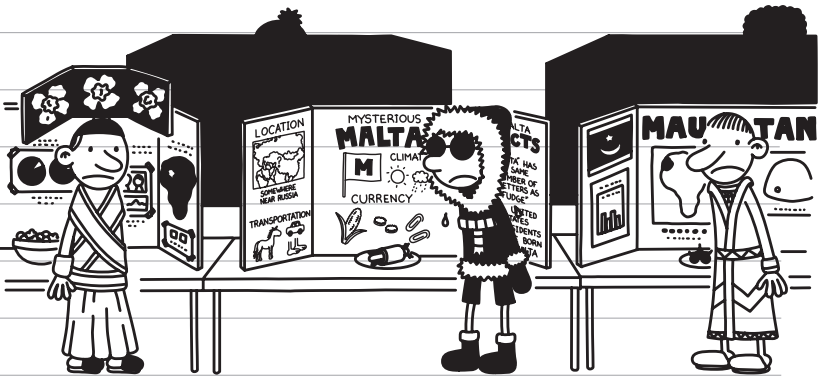
Luckily, there were a few decent items in the box, and I put together an outfit that looked pretty convincing.



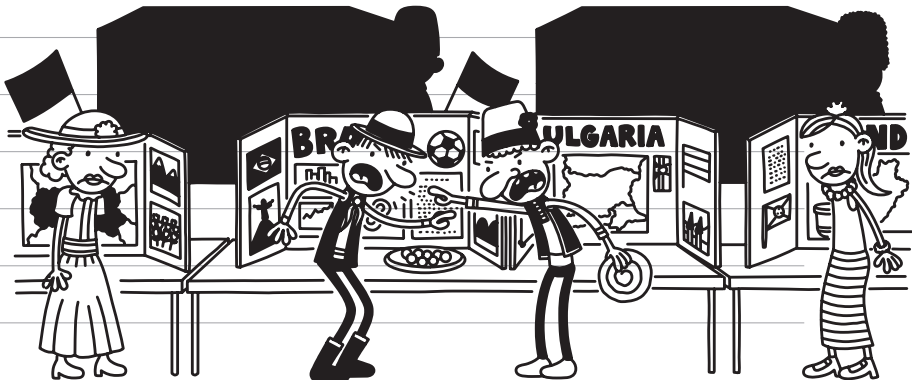
Everyone was supposed to bring in a traditional MEAL, too. At lunch, I bought as many items as I could afford, and threw something together that seemed like it might've come from another country.



The International Showcase was during the last period, and when I set up my project in the gym, I was actually feeling pretty good about things. But I wish I'd gotten assigned a country where they wore lighter clothes, because the furnace was still on full blast.

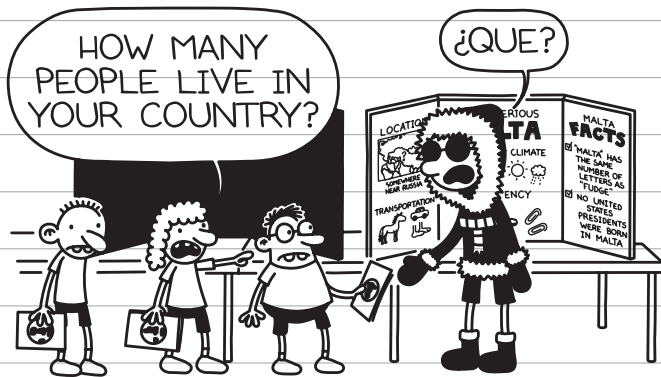


The heat was getting to some OTHER kids, too, and tempers were starting to flare. At one point, Brazil and Bulgaria got in a fight over table space, and a teacher had to come break it up.

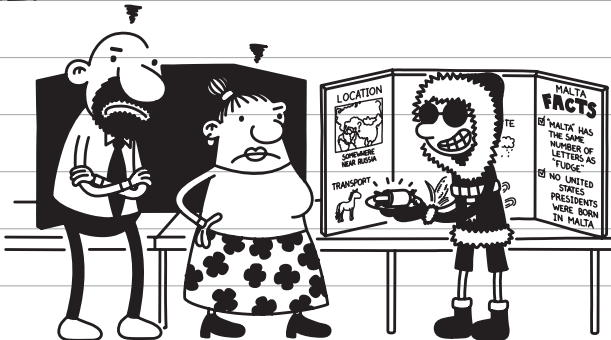




Kids came in from the elementary school to check out our projects and ask questions. But all I had to do to get them to move along was to pretend I only spoke Maltese.



After that, the PARENTS started to arrive. Luckily, MINE couldn't come, because Dad was at work and Mom was at her college. But some kid in my grade has a mom and dad who are actually FROM Malta, which was really bad luck for ME.



I thought they were gonna report me to my teacher, and I was ready to make a run for it. But then something happened that got me off the hook.

The fight that started between Brazil and Bulgaria flared back up and spilled over to the "C" and "D" countries. And before long, the whole GYM was at war.



Luckily the bell rang, and school got dismissed before anyone got seriously hurt. But the whole situation doesn't exactly give me a lot of hope for world peace.