

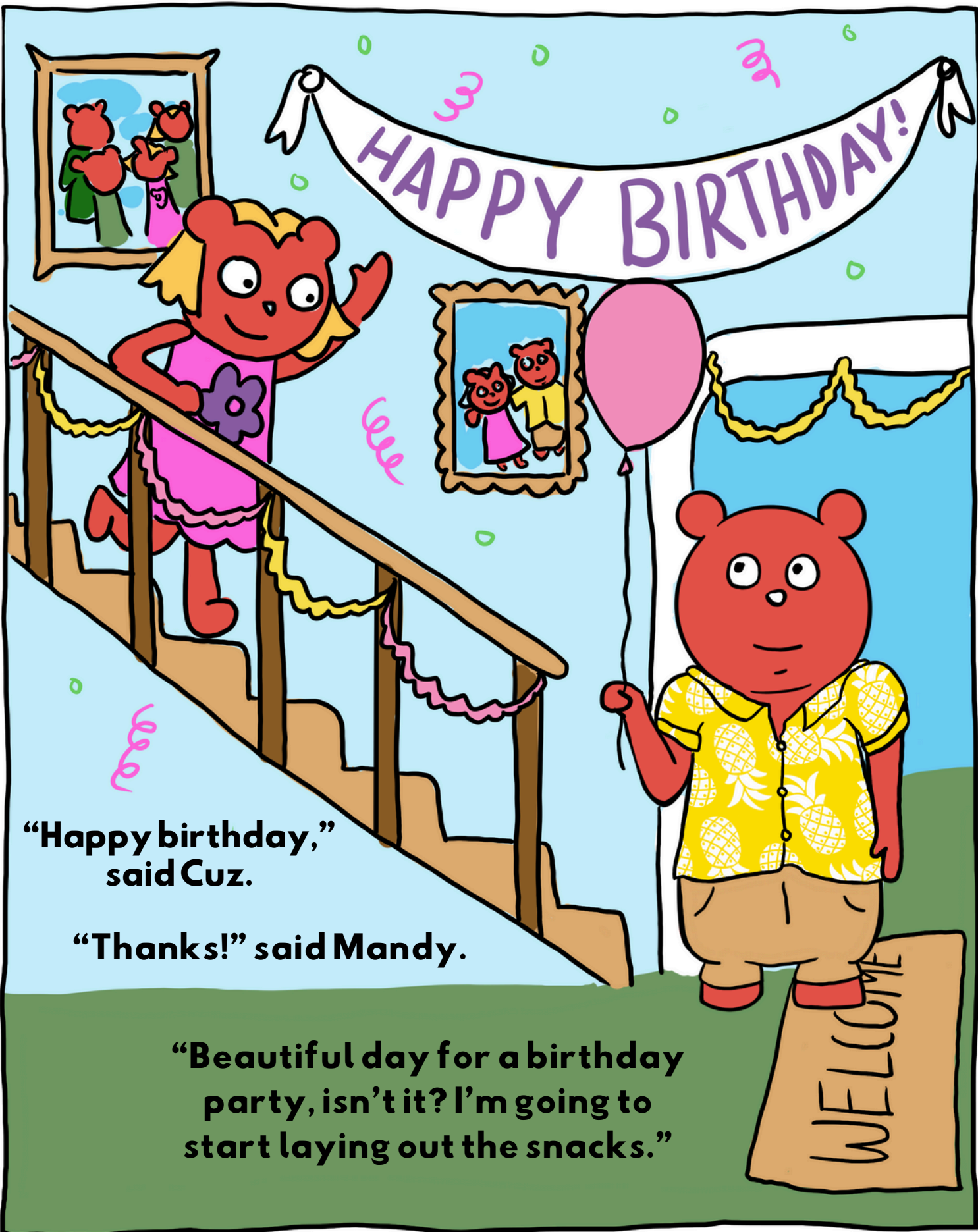
# JUST CUZ



by Barbara Miller



**“It’s here! It’s finally here!” said Mandy.**  
**“The greatest day of the whole year!”**

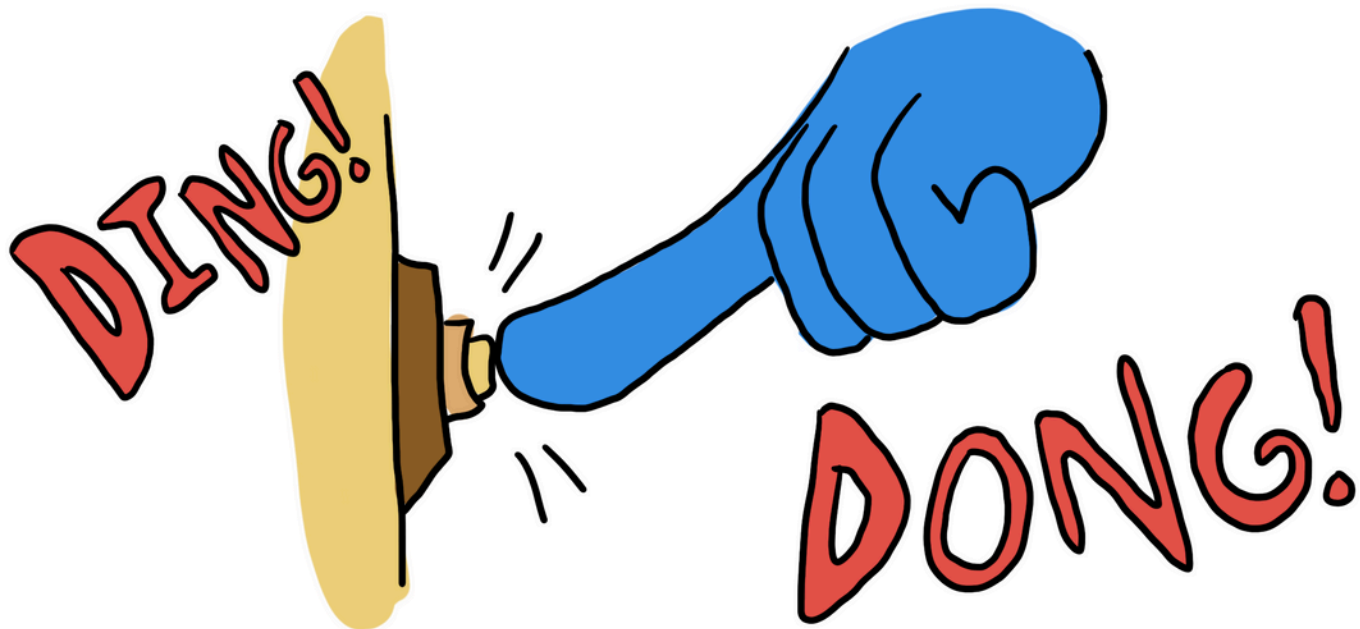


**“Happy birthday,”  
said Cuz.**

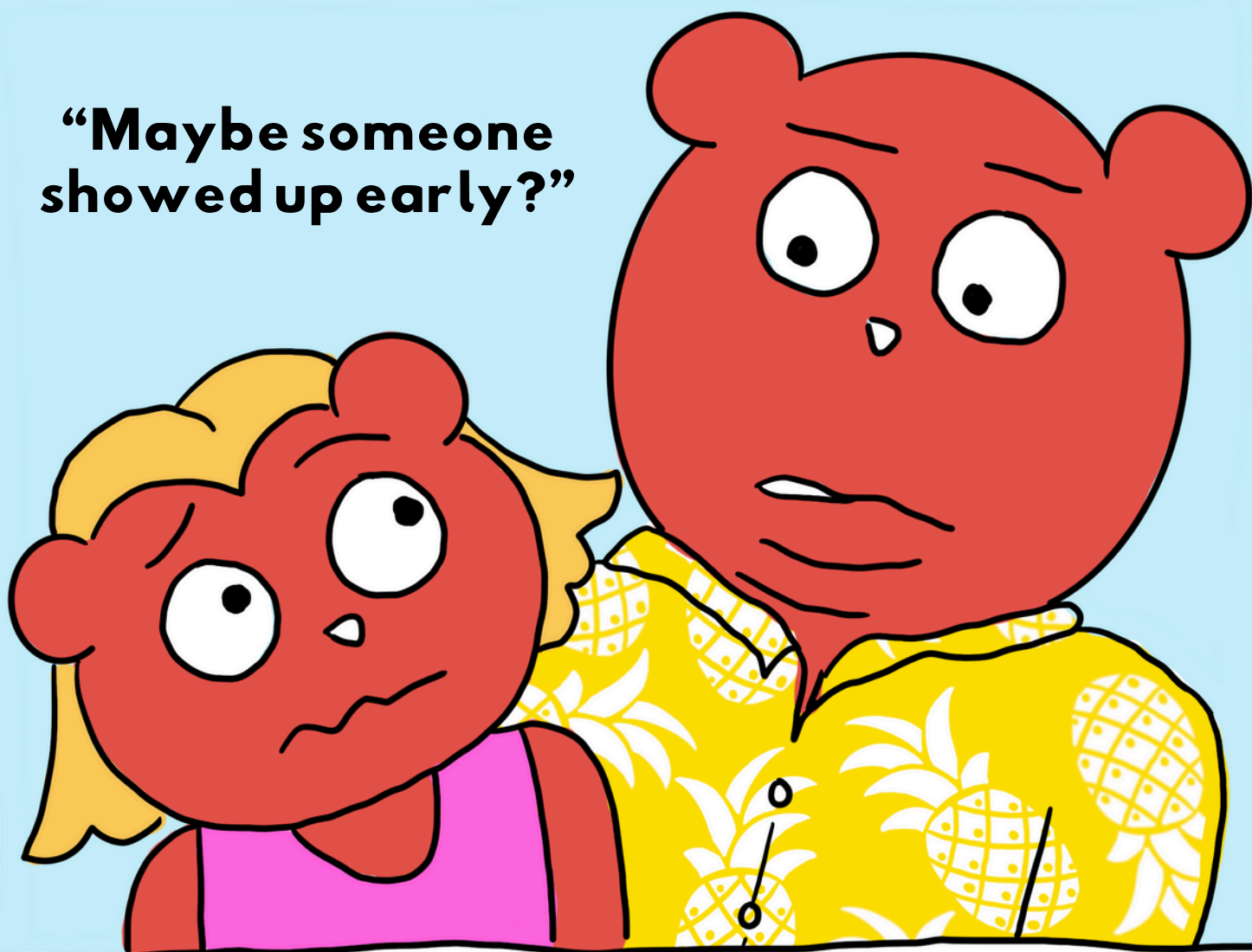
**“Thanks!” said Mandy.**

**“Beautiful day for a birthday  
party, isn’t it? I’m going to  
start laying out the snacks.”**

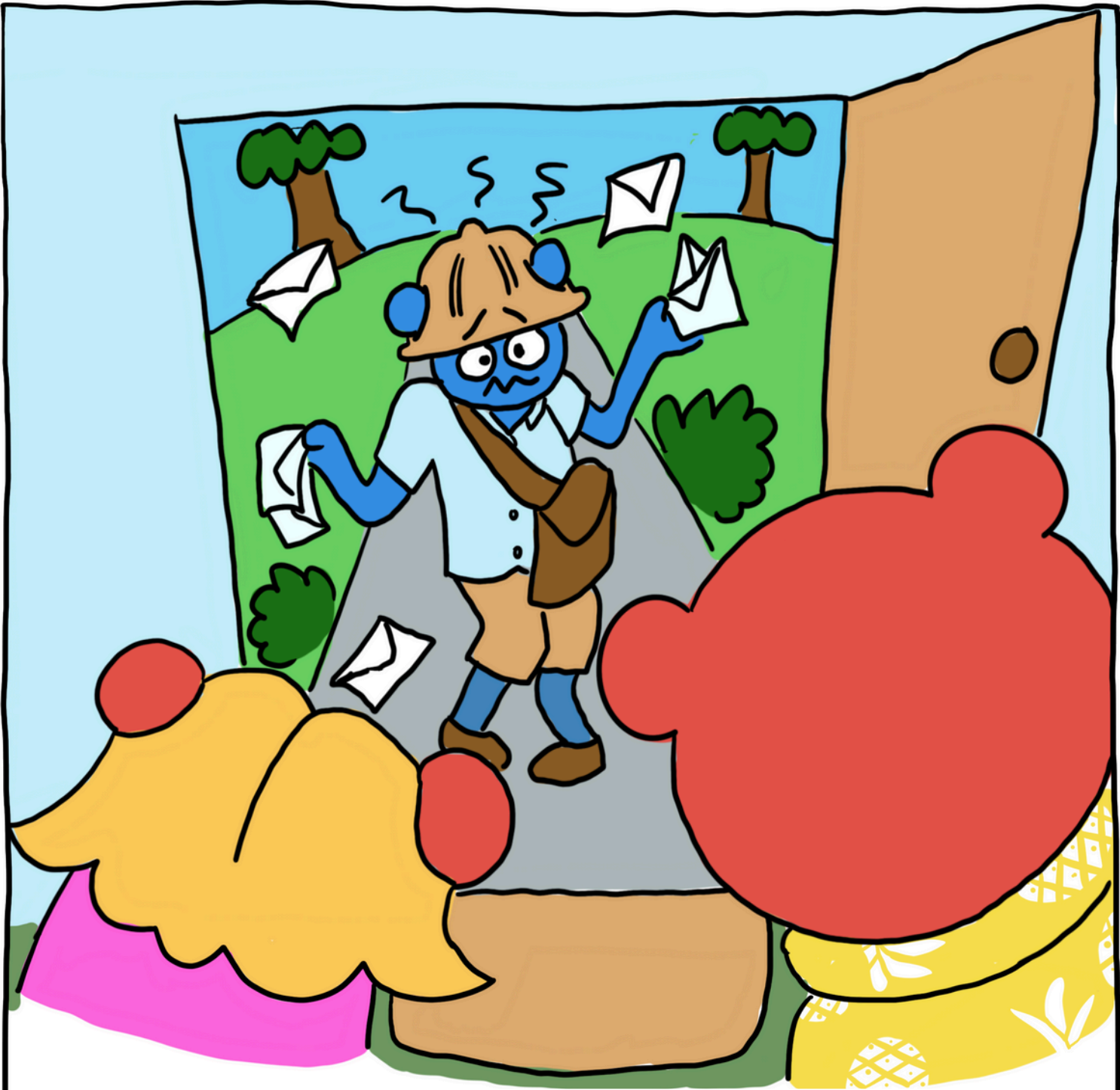




**"Maybe someone  
showed up early?"**







**“I have some troubling news,” said Mailman Marv.**

**“What sort of troubling news?” asked Mandy.**

**“I’m afraid I accidentally shipped the invitations to your birthday party...to Alaska.”**



**“Who’s Mandy?” asked Eskimo Eliott.**

**“I don’t know. But I do love birthday parties,”  
said Eskimo Ella.**

**Mandy gasped!**



**And she stomped!**



**And she cried out!**

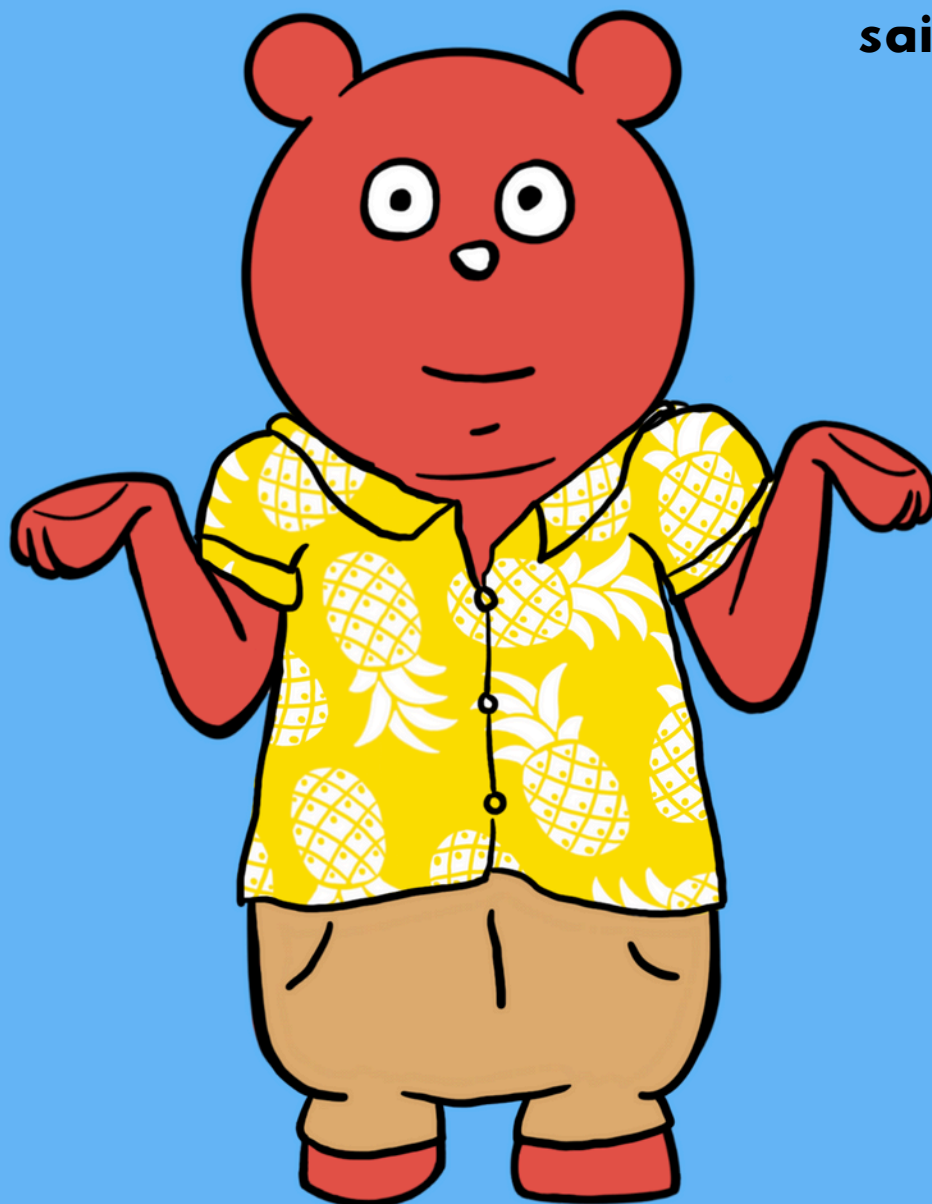


**“Why did my invitations end up in Alaska?!”**

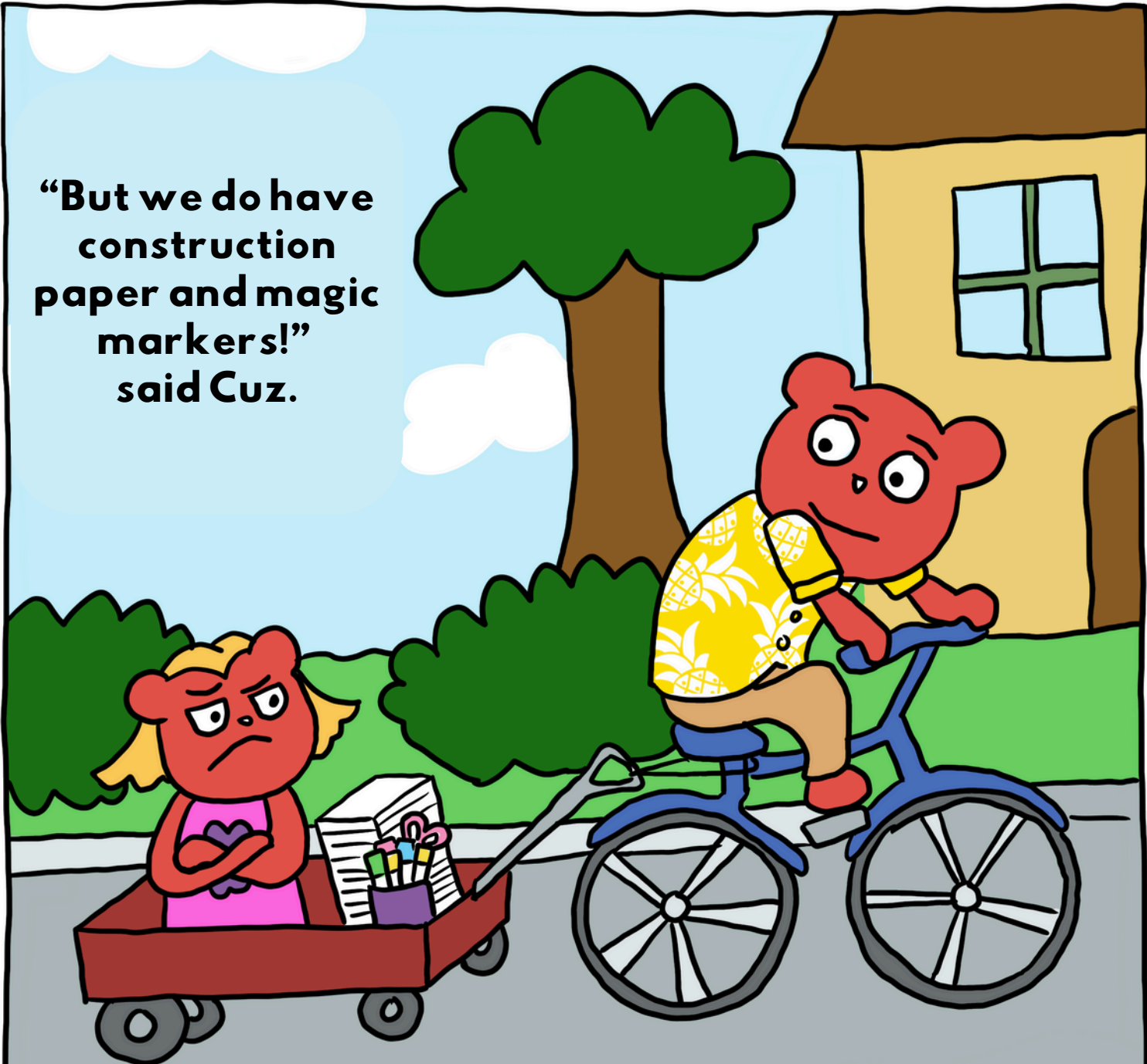


“JUST CUZ”

said Cuz.



**“But we do have  
construction  
paper and magic  
markers!”  
said Cuz.**



**“How about we deliver our own  
invitations?”**

Mandy and Cuz spent the next hour handing out homemade birthday invitations to Mandy's classmates.

A vibrant, cartoon-style illustration depicting a group of anthropomorphic bears in a lush green landscape. In the upper left, a light blue house with a yellow roof and a brown arched doorway stands on a grassy hill. A small brown dog is near the house. A winding grey path leads through the scene. In the upper right, a bear in a yellow shirt and orange pants rides a blue bicycle. Below them, a bear in a blue dress stands next to a bear in a pink dress who is sitting in a red wagon. The bear in the pink dress is handing a white envelope to the bear in the blue dress. In the center, a bear in a red shirt and yellow pants is riding a blue bicycle. To the left of the path, two bears in blue dresses are standing and looking at a white envelope. In the lower left, a bear in a pink dress is sitting in a red wagon, handing a white envelope to a bear in a yellow shirt and orange pants who is riding a blue bicycle. In the lower right, a bear in a blue shirt and red pants is standing with its arms raised. In the bottom right corner, there is a yellow house with a brown roof and a blue window. The background features rolling green hills, several green bushes, and a large green tree on the right side. The sky is a solid light blue.



**After, they took a walk into town to pick up Mandy's double-frosted chocolate-berry cake!**



**Mandy looked forward to seeing her name on a birthday cake all year long.**



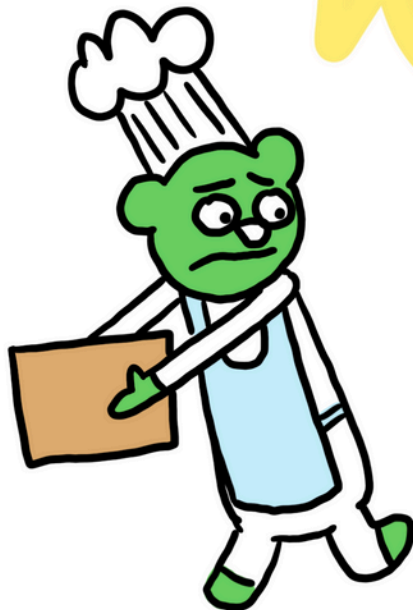
**Mandy gasped!**



**And she stomped!**



**And she cried out!**

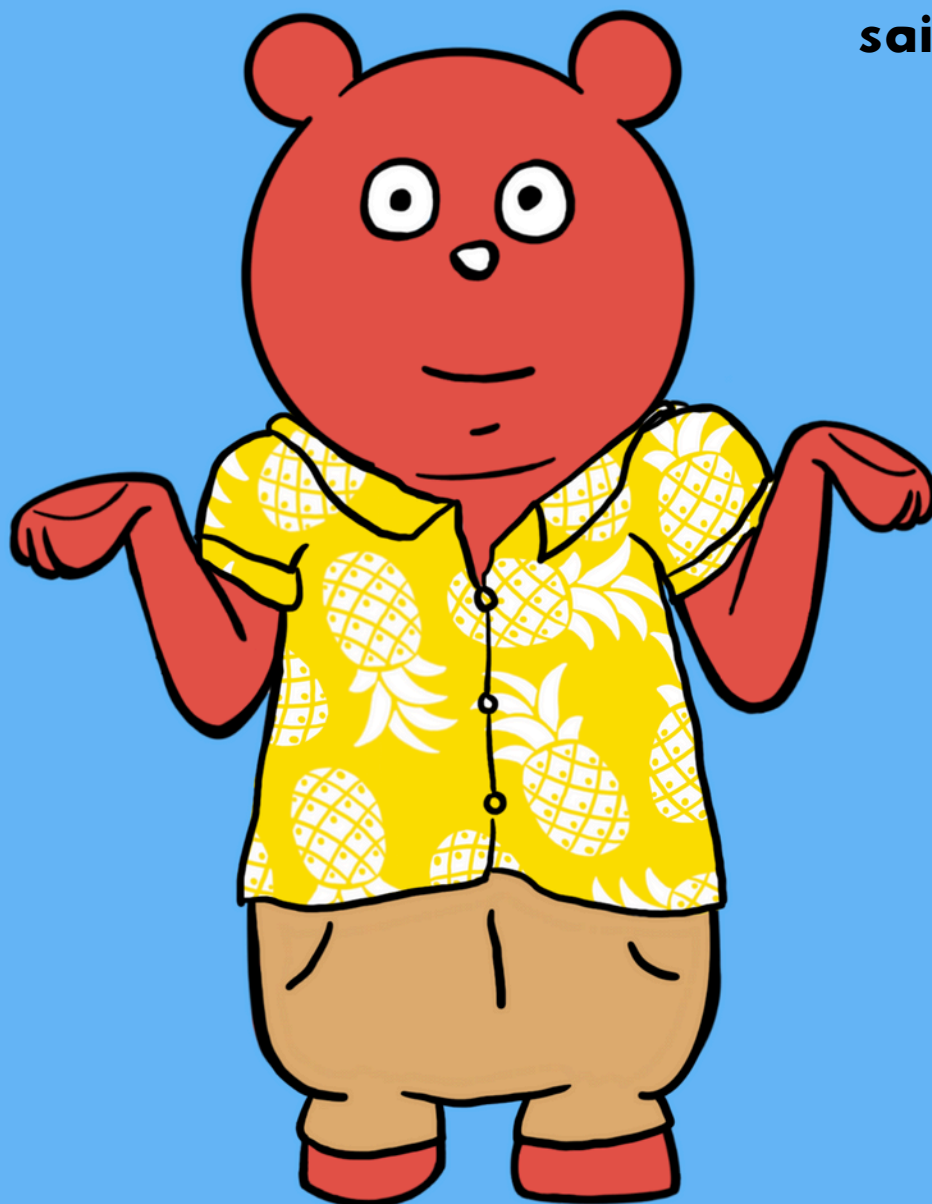


**“Bernie the Baker gave me the wrong cake?!  
WHY?!?!!”**



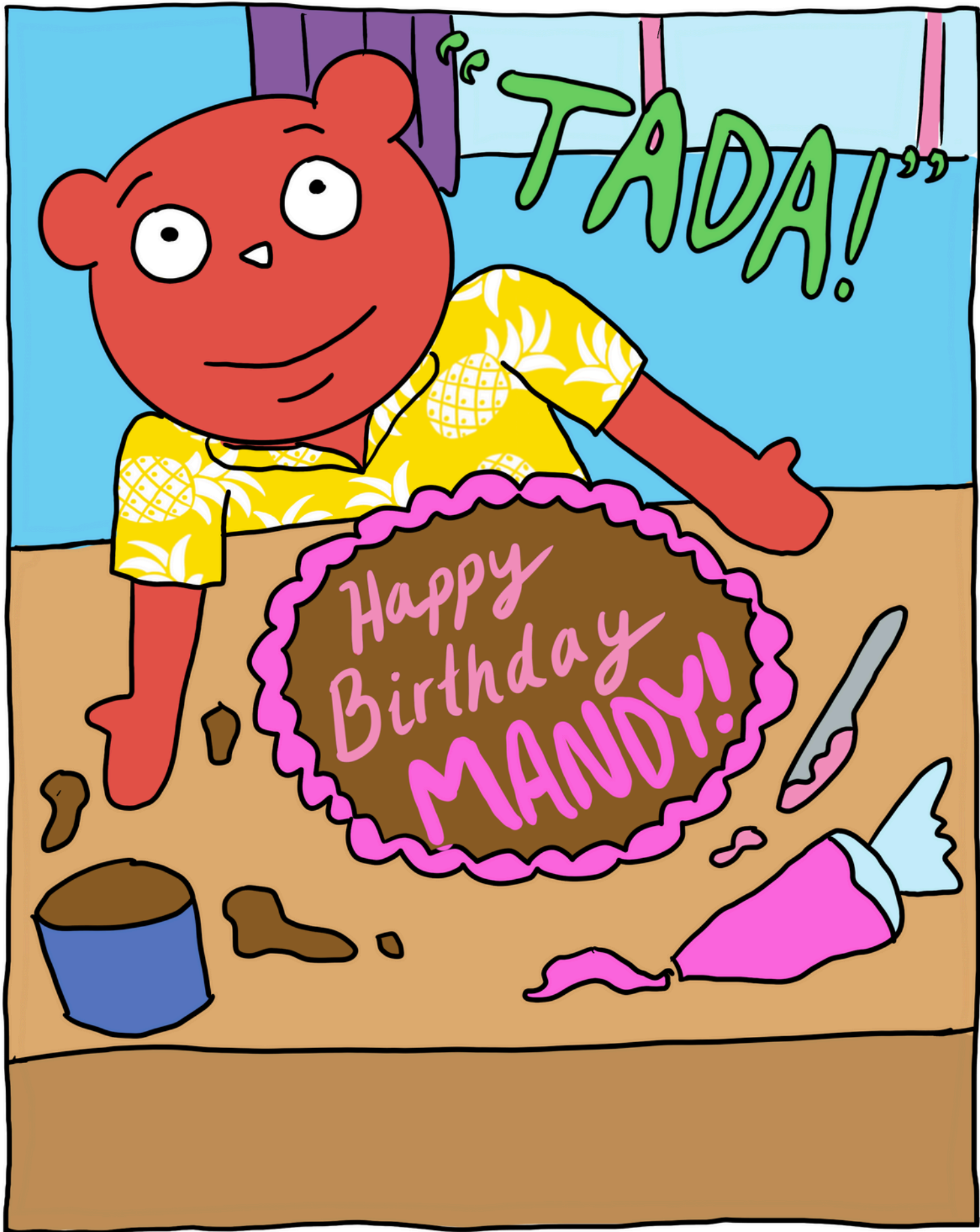
“JUST CUZ”

said Cuz.



**“But I might have an idea...”**







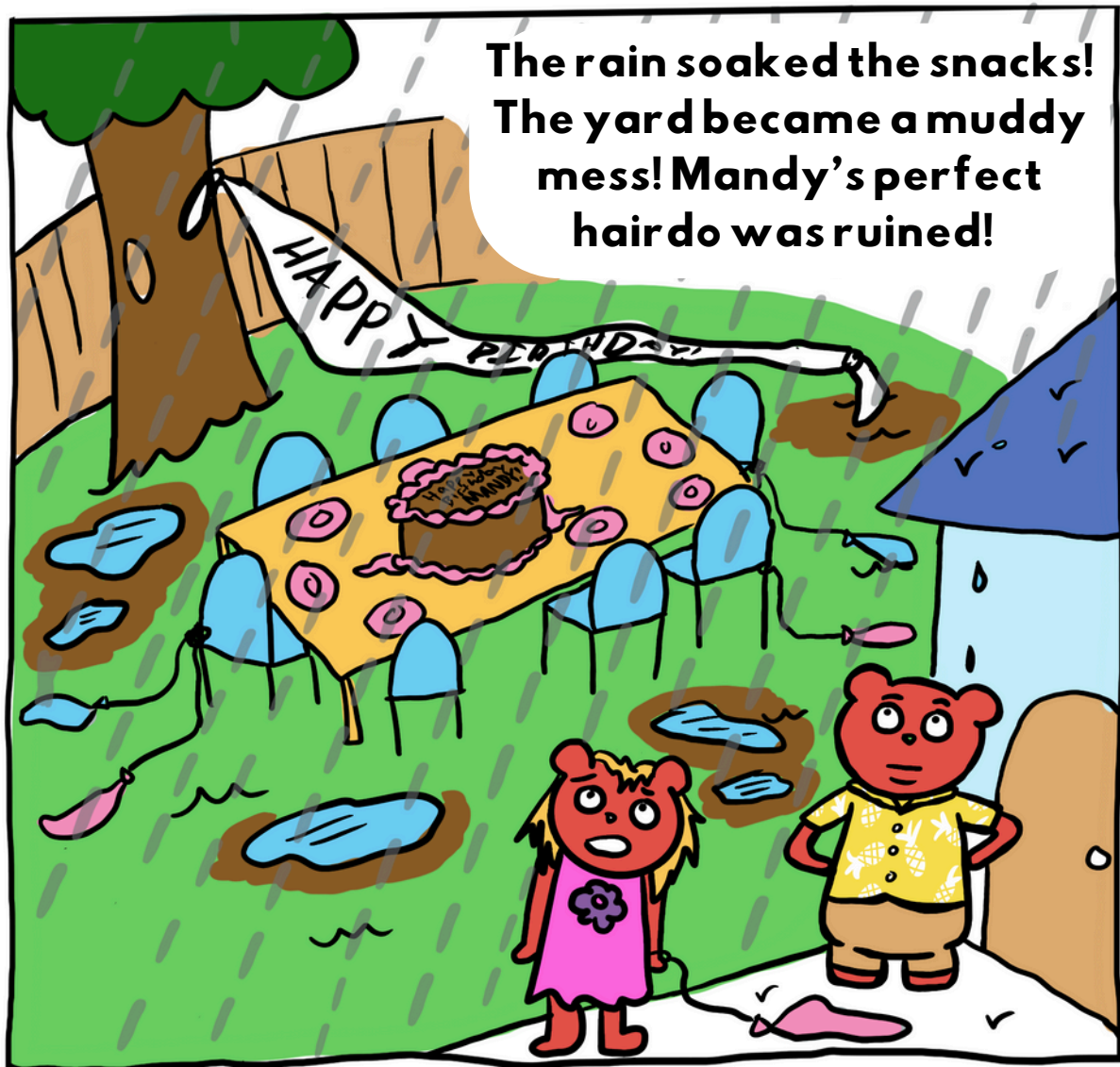
The cake was ready, the backyard decorations were set, and Mandy couldn't wait for her guests to arrive.



"And I'm even having a good hair day," said Mandy.



**That's when she heard it...**



**Mandy gasped!**



**And she stomped!**



**And she cried out!**



**And she shouted to the heavens!**



**“It wasn’t supposed to rain today!  
Why is it raining?!”**



“JUST CUZ”

said Cuz.





**“Stop saying that!  
Stop saying JUST CUZ!”**

said Mandy.



**Mandy fell into her bed, soaked and upset, wondering why the world was out to get her.**



**“I’m a good person,”  
Mandy thought.**

**“I play with  
everyone at school.  
I always eat my  
vegetables.**

**What did I do to  
deserve this?”**



**That's when she  
saw it...**





**Cuz had built a tent in the  
backyard. All of her  
friends were filing in, one  
by one, with big smiles on  
their faces.**

**“A tent party!” said  
Schoolmate Sam.**

**“I LOVE  
TENT PARTIES!”**





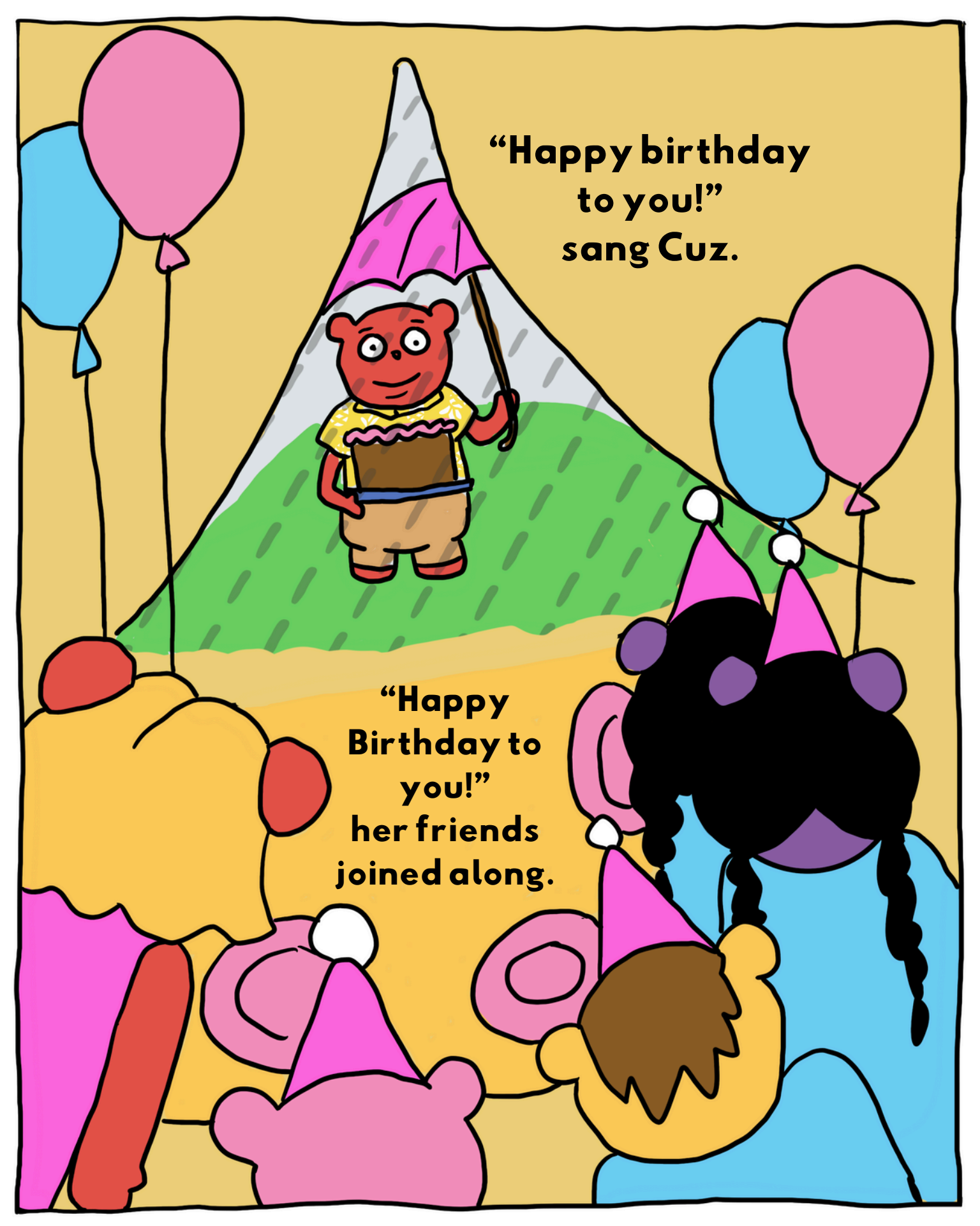
**Mandy realized something then.  
When problems arose throughout the day, Cuz never  
gasped, or shouted, or cried out. Instead, he shrugged,  
and he smiled.**



**And because he always kept his head up, he always  
came up with a clever solution to whatever issue lay  
in front of them.**



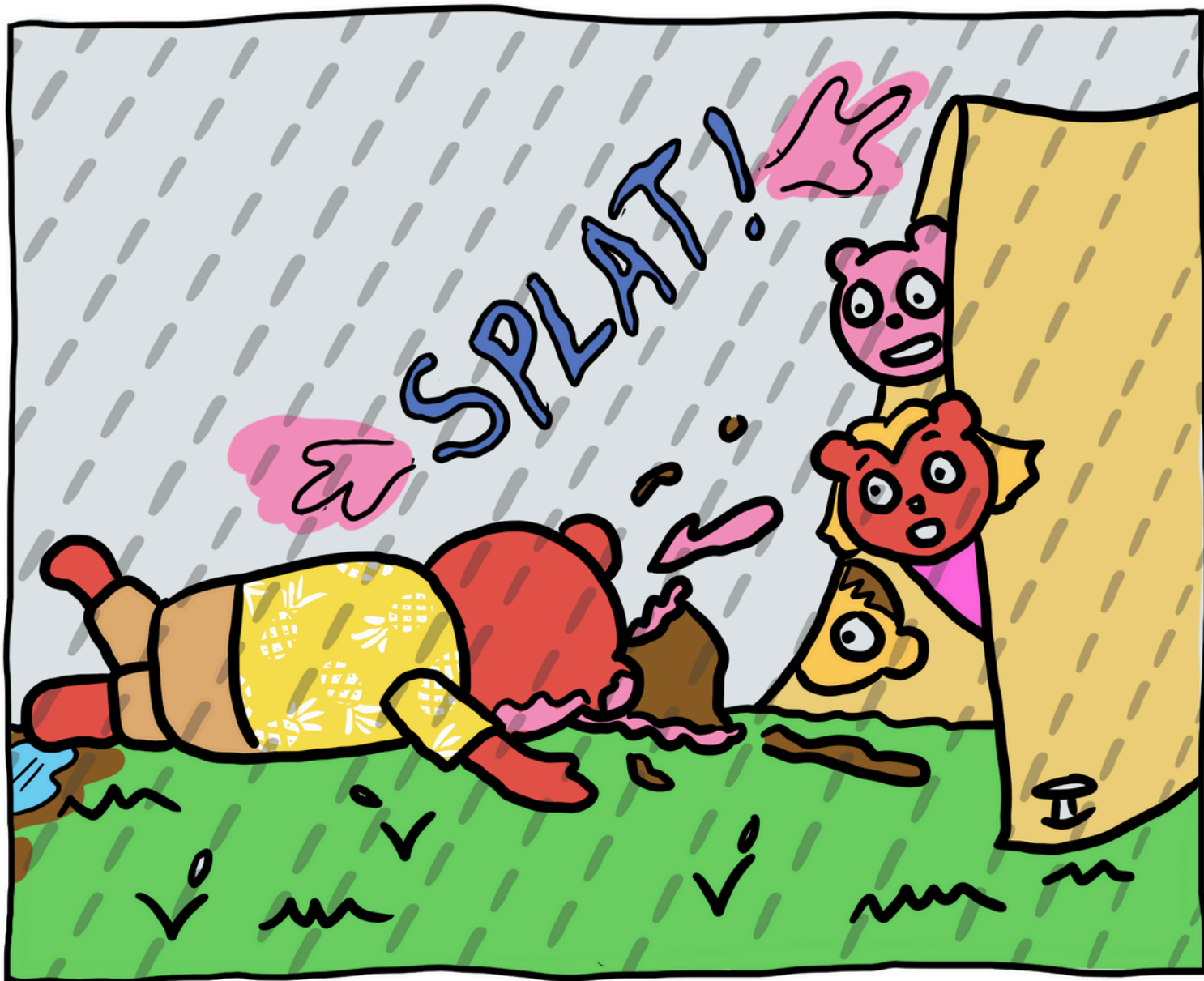
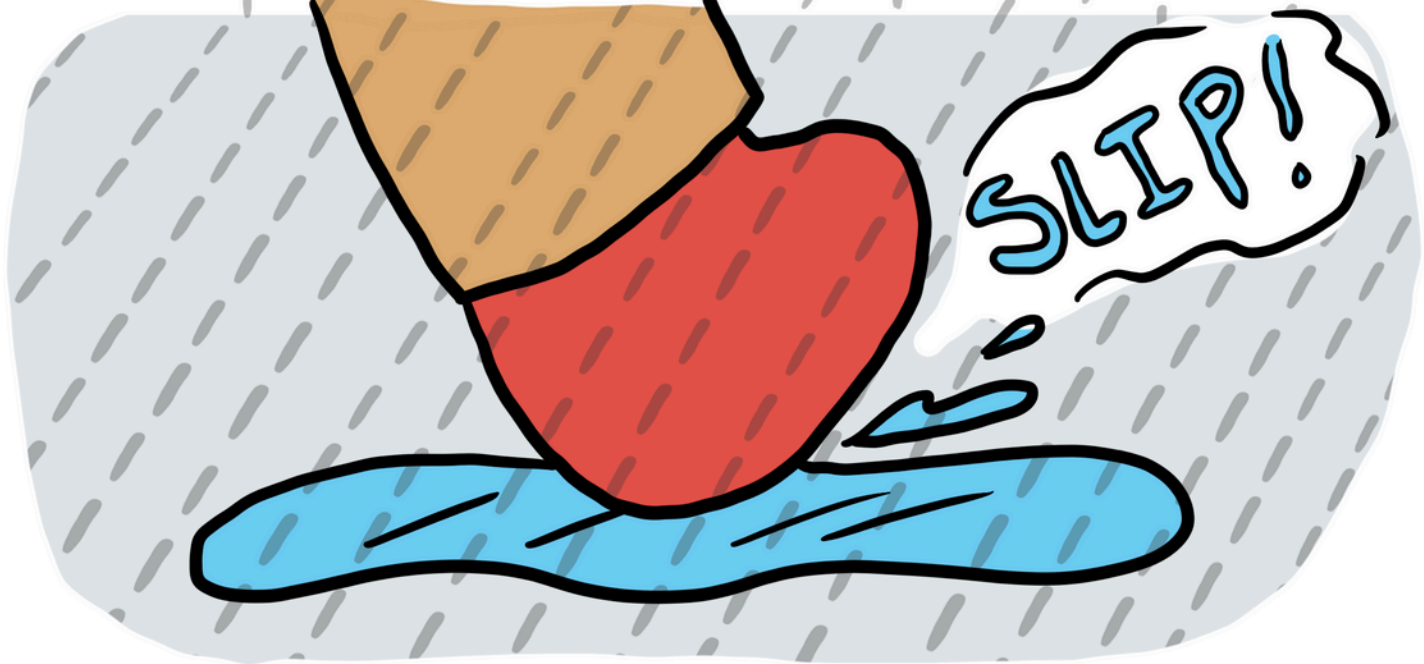
**Mandy felt a warmth growing in her belly as she joined the party. Then she heard a voice out in the rain begin to sing...**



**“Happy birthday  
to you!”  
sang Cuz.**

**“Happy  
Birthday to  
you!”  
her friends  
joined along.**







**“Oh no! Your birthday cake,” said Cuz.**

**“How could I be so clumsy?”**



“JUST CUZ”

said Mandy.



**This time Mandy had an idea.**



**“Frosting fight!” Mandy said.**

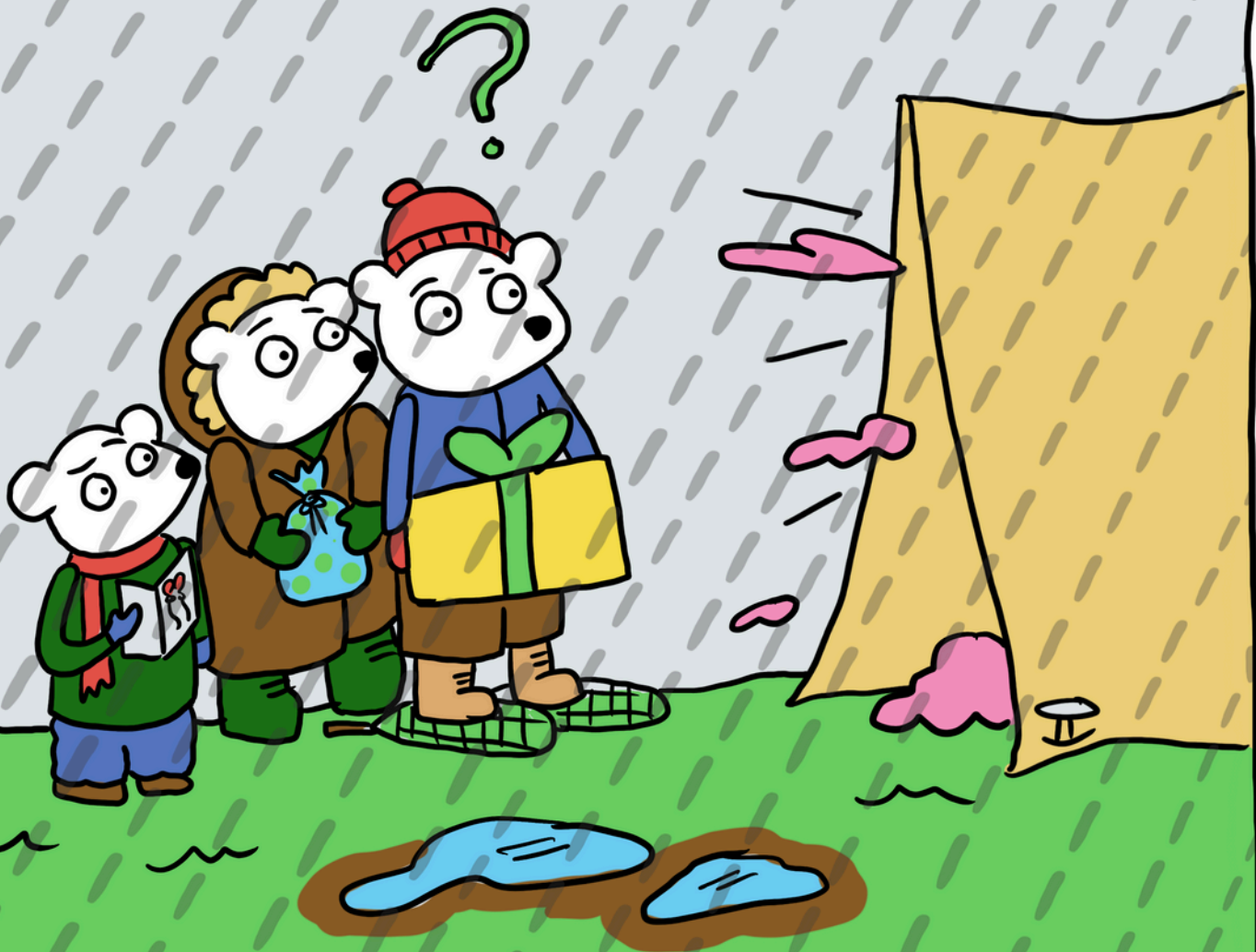
**And as her friends laughed and painted  
the tent and each other with sugary goo,  
Mandy realized something else.**



**The day hadn't turned out like she'd imagined.  
No, it had turned out better.  
In fact, it had been her best birthday yet.**



**“What a strange party we’ve been invited to,” said Eskimo Ella.**



**“Why are they having a frosting fight in a tent in the pouring rain?”**

"JUST CUZ!"

