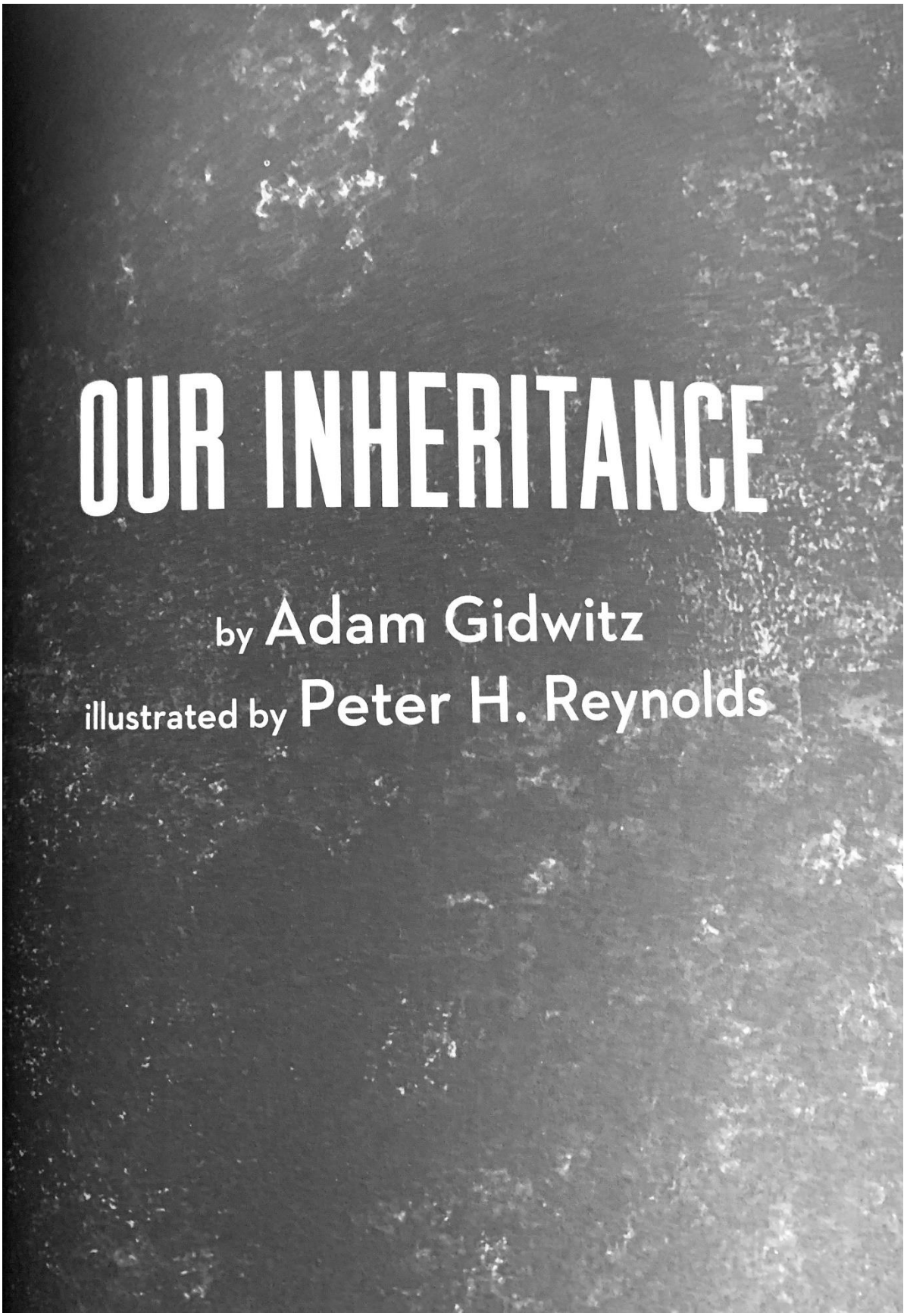
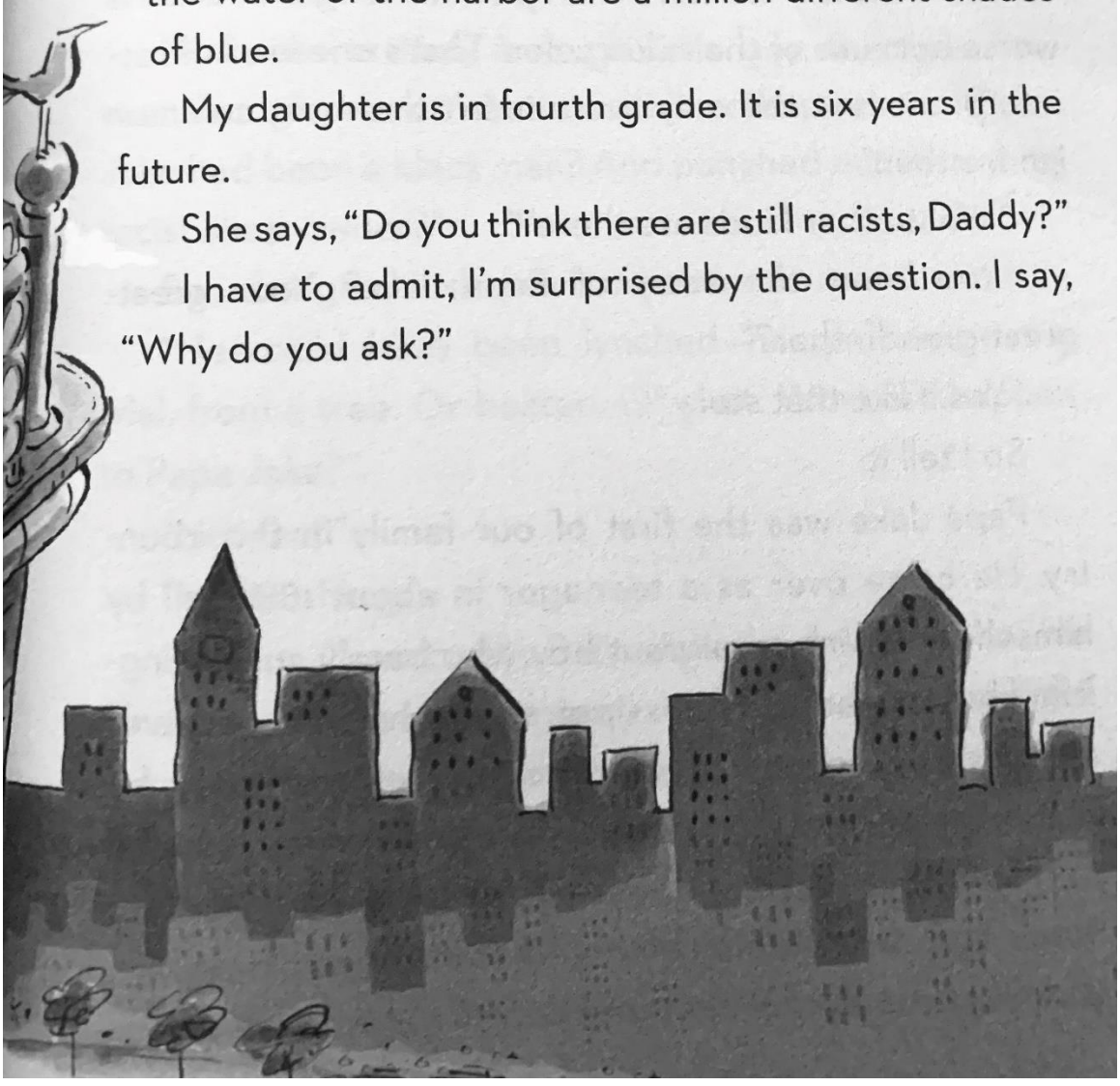

OUR INHERITANCE
by Adam Gidwitz
illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds

My daughter and I are sitting on the roof of our home in Brooklyn Heights. It's a fine summer day. We're looking out over the water, at the glass buildings of Manhattan, reflecting the sun. The glass of the buildings and the water of the harbor are a million different shades of blue.

My daughter is in fourth grade. It is six years in the future.

She says, "Do you think there are still racists, Daddy?"

I have to admit, I'm surprised by the question. I say, "Why do you ask?"



"Because being racist is stupid. The color of your skin has nothing to do with how smart you are or how good you are."

"Preach, girl."

"So . . . *is* there still racism?"

"Oh, yes. All over the place."

"What? But we don't *know* any racists, right? We're not *friends* with any, are we?" And then she decides, "We wouldn't be."

I look at my beautiful daughter. I say, "I think the word 'racism' means a lot more than just 'thinking someone is worse because of their skin color.' That's one kind of racism. But it isn't the only kind. It isn't the most common kind, either."

"What other kinds are there?"

"You know the story of Papa Jake? Your great-great-grandfather?"

"Yes. I like that story."

So I tell it:

Papa Jake was the first of our family in this country. He came over as a teenager in about 1880, all by himself—a Jewish immigrant boy who barely spoke English. He traveled to Mississippi, where he sold pots and pans by hauling a cart under the hot sun. Eventually, he opened a hardware store. The store was very successful.

Now, not everyone down in Mississippi liked him. He was a little Jewish man with a heavy accent. There was one guy, who owned another hardware store in the same

town, who *hated* Papa Jake. He was always ragging on him for being Jewish, teasing him, calling him ugly names.

My daughter interrupts the story. "*That* guy was a racist."

"Yes, he was."

One day, this racist was saying such awful things to Papa Jake that your great-great-grandfather walked straight up to the racist and punched him once, right on the chin. Knocked him out cold. One punch.

My daughter grins. I can see her little hands are fists. "Papa Jake was cool."

"He was certainly a tough little guy. But have you ever thought about what would have happened if Papa Jake had been a black man? And punched out that white racist shop owner?"

She shrugs and shakes her head.

"He could have been lynched—hanged, without a trial, from a tree. Or beaten. Or shot. What *did* happen to Papa Jake?"

"Not that."

"No. Nothing."

I go on: "Eventually, Papa Jake had three sons. He gave them each some money, and they started a little shampoo company. That shampoo company grew and grew into one of the biggest shampoo companies in the whole country.

"We still have the money from that shampoo company. That money is what let us buy this nice house; that

money is what lets us live in this neighborhood; that money is what let me quit my job as a teacher and take a risk on becoming a writer."

"Okay," says my daughter. "So that shop owner was racist. And Papa Jake didn't get lynched. He was lucky, I guess. So . . . who are our racist friends? That's what you were supposed to be telling me."

"Yeah, I *know*," I say, rolling my eyes. "Everything I just told you about Papa Jake is true. You've heard that story before. But it's not the *whole* story."

A nervous silence falls over my daughter. The pinks have turned to grays, the oranges to blues.

"When Papa Jake opened that store in Mississippi, it was about twenty-five years after the enslaved people had been freed. But most weren't *really* free. They lived in the same slave houses, worked the same land, often for the same slave owners. The only difference was that they were called sharecroppers, and they were kept on the land not by law, but by *debt*. So slavery, really, continued for many more decades. It just had a different name. Sharecropping.

"Well, most of Papa Jake's customers were sharecroppers. Since they were kept poor by debt, they always paid Papa Jake with credit. So they were in debt to him, too.

"Eventually, Papa Jake was owed so much money by his sharecropper customers that he got to take possession of the land that a group of them lived on. He

evicted a bunch of those families—kicked them out of their homes."

My daughter's eyes go wide at that.

"Other families he let stay. Papa Jake made so much money from that land that he bought some more. Pretty soon, he owned most of the land in that county. Which means there must have been hundreds of sharecroppers working his land, stuck there like slaves, trapped by debt . . . to him.

"And *that's* how Papa Jake made the money that he gave his sons to start that shampoo company. Not from a little hardware store. Little hardware stores don't make that kind of money. It was from the labor of those proud black women, men, and children who, decades after slavery, were still enslaved . . . by our Papa Jake."

The harbor is dark now. My daughter moves away from me. To the edge of our building. Ferries, lit by strings of lights, stream across the evening. "But," she says, "but . . ."

"But that's not *us*," I say. "*We* didn't do that."

"Right!" she says, relieved.

"That is true, sweetie. We did not. We would not. But it's easy to say that. Now that we have this beautiful home that sharecropping money helped pay for. Now that I can be a successful writer—because I had Papa Jake's money to help me get started."

I scooch myself forward to sit beside her. "Look at this gorgeous harbor. The most perfect natural harbor in

North America. Look at those towering buildings across the water. Look at our beautiful neighborhood."

She looks. The streets around us are lined with stately brick homes, all shadow and gaslight. I say:

"We live on land that belonged to Lenape Indians, land that was taken from them. Land that was worked by indentured servants and slaves. In a nation that wrote slavery of Africans into its Constitution and the genocide of Native Americans into its Declaration of Independence. In a city that grew rich from importing Southern cotton, grown by the enslaved. In a neighborhood built by bankers and shippers and speculators whose best investments were slaves and the produce of slave labor, as well as the stealing and exploitation of Native land. Wall Street, right across the water there, is the site of the New York City slave auction. That's no coincidence."

I put a fist on my daughter's knee. She looks at it. I say, "Racism is not just hatred. Racism is a system. A system that dehumanizes humans in order to keep them down and, most often, to make money off of them."

My daughter exhales. I wonder if she regrets starting this whole conversation. But she hasn't left yet. Hasn't gone downstairs to hide from her discomfort in the soft light of small screens. For that, I'm proud of her.

I ask, "Are we polluters?"

She's very eco-conscious, so I know what she's going to say. She crinkles her chin. "Yeah. We recycle, and we reuse. We're not a big coal plant, pumping poison into

the sky. But we use plastic, we use cars, we fly when we go on vacation. We're polluters. I wish we weren't."

I smile at her sadly. "You're so smart."

My daughter turns and faces me.

I say: "Being a polluter is a lot like being a racist. I hate pollution. And I hate racism. But I sit here and I benefit from them both."

She squints. I tell her, "My country was built on racism. My *life* was built on it. You asked me, 'Who are the racists that we know?' I am sorry to tell you: You're looking at one right now."

There is silence. Around us, the sky is black. The moon shines down brightly, amid a near-starless sky.

"I try to fight racism every day, sweetheart. I try to understand a system that *still* treats people unfairly—that segregates our neighborhoods, that keeps resources in white hands. And I try to change that system, to make it more fair to everyone. But being racist isn't *some other people's* problem. It's *mine*. And, though I've tried so hard to raise you right, it's yours, too."

My daughter asks, "What are you saying?"

"Only this: I want you to be honest with yourself about our inheritance—our inheritance of racism. Learn about it. Think about it. Maybe one day you'll want to join the people who are working to fight racism in our society. I hope you do. But the first step, the most important step, is being honest. Learning, and being uncomfortable with what you learn, and most of all, being honest. And then,

when *you* have a child, and you have this talk with *them*, maybe we'll be living in a more fair and just world. And maybe, just maybe, you'll be able to say that you helped make it that way."