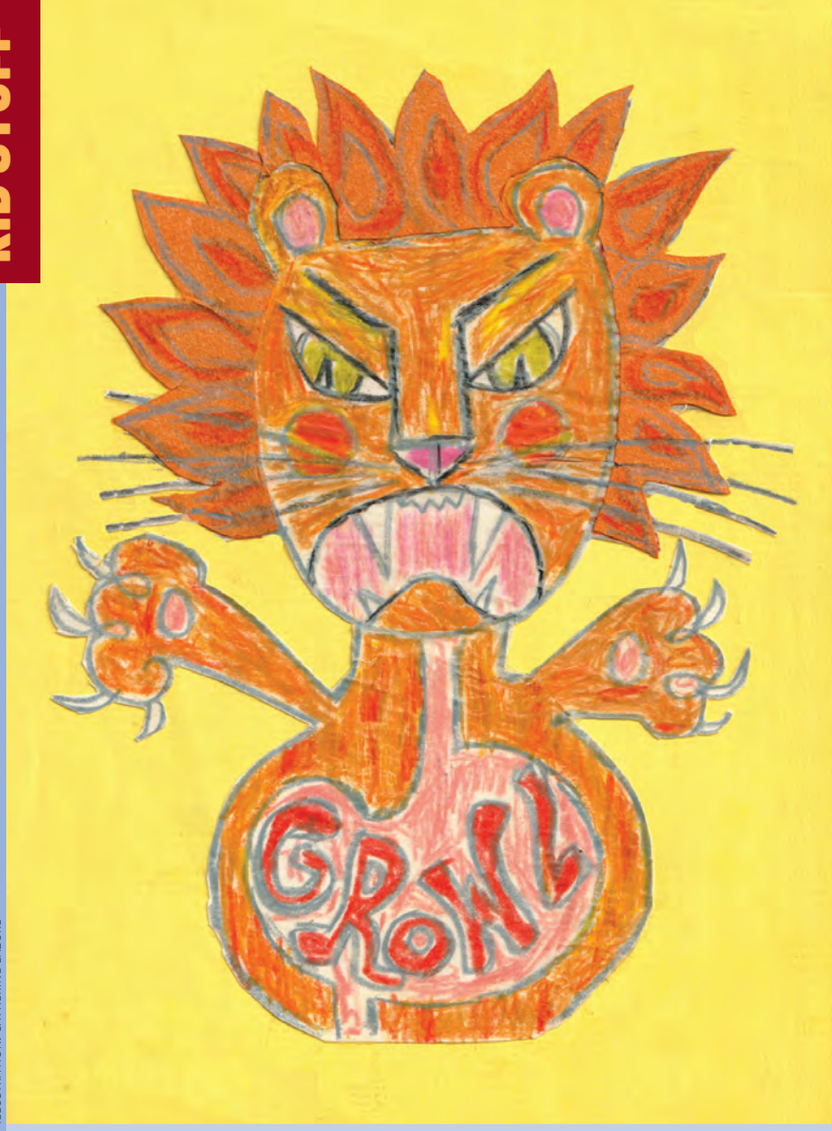

ILLUSTRATION: CATHERINE LAZURE

FOR REAL! TWEEN SCIENCE

"Hangry" happens. But why?

Babies cry for the breast or bottle. Toddlers have meltdowns that can only be quieted with food. Growth-spurting teens ravage the pantry daily after school; standing in their way is not advised. We are all born to be "hangry" (hungry plus angry). So, what's actually happening inside our bodies when that irritability comes on and snowballs so quickly? What's the cause and effect? Why do some people get hangrier than others? Is there a quick fix?

First things first: Hangry is a real thing, biologically speaking.

Our bodies need fuel in the form of food to keep running. When we go too long without eating, our blood sugar drops and the stomach and intestines send signals to the brain, saying, "Feed me." That's the feeling of hunger. The main messenger here is a hormone called ghrelin—sounds like growlin', as in, the sound your stomach makes. (The scientific term for that growl is borborygmi.)

Ghrelin gets released when your stomach is empty and shuts off when your stomach is full. For most people, the timing clicks along with sleep-wake cycles and eating routines.

In addition, stress or intense emotions can actually lead to more ghrelin production and hunger. Stress-eating is a cousin of hangriness.

So, in other words: Sometimes an empty stomach can make you feel distressed. And sometimes distress can make you feel hungry.

In response to ghrelin, the brain releases other hormones that help drive the desire to go find something to eat. (Not all stress is bad!) But of course, each of us has a different emotional relationship to food. And what's happening around us can also influence behavior, sometimes complicating the calculus of when, why and what we eat.

A quick fix? A quick snack. Even better: Get off the mood-altering cycle by eating well and regularly. *—Micaela Fox Corn*

Thanks to David Levinthal, a Pitt Med brain-body-tummy expert (neurogastroenterologist), for helping us make hangry more palatable, at least for this article.