

SCSC Writing Contest Anthology 2020-21

SCSC Writing Contest 2020–21

Theme: Defining Moments

[SCSC Writing Contest Anthology 2020-21](#) Copyright © by Original Authors. All Rights Reserved.

Dedication

***Thank you to all those who worked with the SCSC Writing Contest
and this anthology:***

To the staff at South Central Service Cooperative who promoted the contest, gathered and catalogued submissions, served as judges and provided feedback to students, and designed the anthology layout.

To the students and staff at Minnesota State University, Mankato education department who served as judges and provided feedback to students on their writing submissions.

To the teachers, parents, friends and relatives who encouraged students to express themselves through writing.

*Finally, to the students who shared their work for this year's contest.
We are most grateful.*

This activity is made possible in part by a grant from the Prairie Lakes Regional Arts Council from funds appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislature from its general fund.

For more information, visit www.mnscsc.org/writing-contest

Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Disclaimer</u>	2
<u>Poetry</u>	
<u>Butterflies and Fears</u>	4
<u>By Emmett Alan Gaalswyk</u>	
<u>Where I Live</u>	6
<u>By Taryn Hecksel</u>	
<u>Come Sit with Me</u>	7
<u>By Madeline Heuss</u>	
<u>One Word</u>	8
<u>By Madeline Heuss</u>	
<u>Wings</u>	9
<u>By Madeline Heuss</u>	
<u>Morning</u>	10
<u>By Grace MacPherson</u>	
<u>The Epic Easter</u>	12
<u>By Price MacPherson</u>	
<u>Victory from Death</u>	17
<u>By Rose MacPherson</u>	
<u>My Tree</u>	18
<u>By Zoe Middleton</u>	
<u>The Artist</u>	19
<u>By Martha Price</u>	
<u>Time</u>	20
<u>By Addie Ricke Young</u>	
<u>Peace Comes at Night</u>	21
<u>By Andie Sanderson</u>	
<u>Moments</u>	22
<u>By Thomas Straka</u>	
<u>Anxiety</u>	23
<u>By Carly Wenninger</u>	
<u>My Little Sunflower</u>	24
<u>By Carly Wenninger</u>	

<u>Unspeakable Love</u>	25
<u>By Carly Wenninger</u>	
<u>Fiction</u>	
<u>The Travelers</u>	27
<u>By Anden Brandt</u>	
<u>The Start of Freddy and Cali's Adventures</u>	30
<u>By Aidric Calderon</u>	
<u>My Not-So-Boring Day</u>	32
<u>By Zariah DeBerry</u>	
<u>A Dream Come True</u>	35
<u>By Jordyn Earl</u>	
<u>Shoes</u>	39
<u>By Claire Elness</u>	
<u>Gilbert and Harold's Adventure</u>	43
<u>By Elliott Garry</u>	
<u>Etapalli Going Eastward</u>	44
<u>By Madeline Heuss</u>	
<u>Taco Argument</u>	46
<u>By Marco Jakovich</u>	
<u>Kyla's Sweet Sixteen</u>	47
<u>By Kaedyn Judd</u>	
<u>Willow</u>	49
<u>By Randi Krueger</u>	
<u>A Hidden Talent</u>	53
<u>By Grace LaFrance</u>	
<u>The Rider</u>	57
<u>By Grace MacPherson</u>	
<u>The Lost Children</u>	60
<u>By Joy MacPherson</u>	
<u>Lily</u>	61
<u>By Ella J. Olson</u>	
<u>Coasting</u>	65
<u>By Lauren Oswald</u>	
<u>The Hero</u>	66
<u>By Brynn Payne</u>	
<u>Cliff's Edge</u>	67
<u>By Leila Pratt and Delaney Rosera</u>	

<u>The Bench Under the Apple Tree</u>	69
<u>By Leah Proehl</u>	
<u>Wendy's Blossoming and Blooming Confidence Feat</u>	72
<u>By Cami Schuh</u>	
<u>Her Story</u>	75
<u>By Randi Selbrade</u>	
<u>The Joy of Reading</u>	79
<u>By Nityan Sharma</u>	
<u>The Camp</u>	81
<u>By Rohan Sharma</u>	
<u>Redemption</u>	84
<u>By Rohan Sharma</u>	
<u>A Silent World</u>	86
<u>By Angela Shwe</u>	
<u>The Crash</u>	90
<u>By Annabelle Skurkay</u>	
<u>Jeff and Ed, The Crime Fighting Duo</u>	91
<u>By Devin Vanryswyk</u>	
<u>The Adventure Girls</u>	93
<u>By Amara Vanthavong</u>	
<u>Regina and the Community Changers Club</u>	96
<u>By Sophia Williams</u>	
<u>Teddy Bear</u>	99
<u>By Sophia Williams</u>	
<u>Nonfiction</u>	
<u>Four Words that Inspired America</u>	101
<u>By Lila Adams</u>	
<u>Getting a Fun Dog</u>	103
<u>By Kameron Brink</u>	
<u>Life's Defining Moments</u>	106
<u>By Claire Elness</u>	
<u>My Most Defining Moment</u>	109
<u>By Elyzah Erickson</u>	
<u>My Diabetes Story</u>	110
<u>By Emerson Garry</u>	
<u>The Accidental Accident</u>	112
<u>Andree Jakovich</u>	

<u>The Impossible Pet</u>	114
<u>By Marco Jakovich</u>	
<u>When Life Does Not Go Right, Go Left</u>	115
<u>By Sasha Jakovich</u>	
<u>Muskeg and Me</u>	117
<u>By Helen Kliewer</u>	
<u>Glasses</u>	118
<u>By Gracie Larson</u>	
<u>Pathway to Grief</u>	119
<u>By Greta Luskey</u>	
<u>Defining Moments Today</u>	121
<u>By Grace MacPherson</u>	
<u>Camouflage</u>	122
<u>By Elijah Mons</u>	
<u>Getting a Puppy</u>	123
<u>By Charlie Nelson</u>	
<u>My First Deer</u>	126
<u>By Anna Nielsen</u>	
<u>Hope to Life</u>	129
<u>By Freya Peterson</u>	
<u>The Fur Trade</u>	130
<u>By Leila Pratt</u>	
<u>The Pandemic and My Journey to Ireland</u>	131
<u>By Amna Syeda</u>	
<u>Swimming Changed My Life</u>	132
<u>By Fatima Syeda</u>	
<u>About the Authors</u>	133

The SCSC Writing Contest provides students with an opportunity to express themselves through fiction, non-fiction and/or poetry. This contest was established to encourage the love of language and writing for all students and as a way to recognize the talented young writers in south central Minnesota. SCSC partners with Minnesota State University, Mankato on this project. Students in grades K–12 attending public, private or homeschools are eligible to enter. Up to three pieces per category and submissions in multiple categories are welcome.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the sponsors. Some of the works may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.

Poetry

Poetry:

Arrangement of words in an artistic and purposeful manner that expresses the writer's thoughts and/or feelings about a subject of their choice using style and rhythm (ex: sonnets, haiku, free verse).

Butterflies and Fears

By Emmett Alan Gaalswyk

I had a fear of butterflies,
(I was young then, okay?)
They looked very odd to me,
So I always ran away.
I did not like their colors,
They looked poisonous,
And that way they flapped their wings,
They looked so villainous!
Then one day my mom said,
“We will go somewhere fun,
It is filled with butterflies...
Say, why are you so glum?”
I said that it was nothing,
I said that I felt fine,
But way deep down inside,
I wanted to decline!
When we got there I was scared,
Look at all these wings,
I felt like I was going to die,
With their poking and their stings!
Then time went by, as it does,
It was about a year or so after.
We went to buy some new spring flowers,
When my heart turned to a new chapter.
I saw one there, all black and orange,
And it did not look so bad.
Nobody was panicking,
Maybe I should be glad?
I saw this pretty butterfly,
Then it flew away from me.
But patience, patience, patience,
Was, of course, the key.
So I waited for a while,
And held out my small hand.
And soon it crawled right over,
Then, my heart did expand!
It caused a change in my views,
For butterflies big and small.
My mom was so surprised,
I let him land on me at all!

I explained to her that day,
I conquered one of my fears.
She was so very proud of me,
She even broke into tears!
So, the moral of this story,
Try and conquer your fears!
You will be so very happy,
For oh so many years!
Now excuse me because I,
Am going out to the trees.
Why? Because I'm gonna conquer,
My big ol' fear of bees!

Where I Live

By Taryn Hecksel

Where I live
There's joy but fright
Where I live
There's happiness in sight
Where I live
There's gratefulness and sorrow
Where I live
There is a tomorrow
Where I live
I discover there are some people with no cover
In this world of dreadfulness and night
Some people put people a fight
But they should always know
There is a light
The Light of Christ

Come Sit with Me

By Madeline Heuss

Come sit with me, under the stars
And ponder never being far
Come sit with me by fire warmth
And remember what we are fighting for
While sitting under the moon
We will know we can't lose
But wherever you are
Come sit with me
And while we are there
Let's never leave

One Word

By Madeline Heuss

Love

A lifetime of happiness and hugs

Beauty

An image they never thought they would see

Hey

A simple way to light up their day

Slut

The first thing to make them cut

Everything you say

Could make or break someone's day

They could finally be okay

Or slowly fade away

The scars inside don't always heal

Because once something is broken, it will never look new

You have to control what you say and do

Because you never know what someone is going through

Wings

By Madeline Heuss

Take a breath and leap
Spread your wings
Finally be free
For when you soar
You will worry no more
Free yourself from all weight
For nothing is worth that pain
Soar over great mountains and seas
Fully embrace the peace
Perch upon the tallest trees
And finally freely breathe
Everything will be okay,
While you soar over ocean grey
So fly free, love,
And watch us from above

Morning

By Grace MacPherson

Early morning –
All the world sleeping
Except one woman –
Noiselessly she slips through the garden,
Thinking only of one thing.
Birds' wings flutter
Softly, close to her;
But she does not hear them.
She rushes forward
And the tomb where they laid him is empty.
She kneels, weeping;
Her mind rushes back
Three days ago
When God died.
He hung long on the cross,
His body beaten, broken, bleeding,
His spirit heavy with the guilt of the world;
And he asked why God his father left him
And no one knew what to say
So they said nothing.
But his enemies mocked him and
Told him to come down
If he was really God.
He did not come down.
He died there;
And everything was over.
The sky went dark
Though it was still midday,
And the moon was bloody when it rose.
And they took down the body
And sealed God in the ground
Forever.
Now the tomb is open –
She breathes quickly, wondering:
Maybe forever is not forever?
But no...
She saw him dead.
She cleaned his body.
God is dead.
Someone behind her –

She turns quickly.
It is only the gardener.
She sighs, shoulders slump in disappointment,
Asking where they have put him,
Where they have moved the dead body of God.
He says her name:
“Mary!”
And she knows that God is not dead –
It was for her he died;
It is for her he lives again –
For her, and for the whole world.
And it changes everything forever
Because by his blood we are spotless in his eyes.
And because he died and rose again
We too shall rise!
If we believe that he died for us,
That God died and yet lives.

The Epic Easter

By Price MacPherson

Part One: Betrayal

Spoke chief priests who sought to kill Jesus:

“Let’s ask Iscariot to help us.”

“Out of the people’s sight so there will not be a riot,”

Said the one of the Twelve named Judas Iscariot.

“Jesus of Nazareth I will give to you

For thirty pieces of silver from you.”

On the first day of the Unleavened Bread

The Twelve came to Jesus and wondering, said:

“Where today do you want us to meet?

Where the Passover meal shall we eat?”

He gave them directions as to where,

And they readied the Passover there.

But while they were eating,

Jesus gave a bad greeting:

“One of you will betray Me,

One who eateth here with Me.”

John asked, “Lord is it I?”

And another, “Or I?”

“’Tis to whom I give bread.”

He gave Judas the bread.

“What you’ll do, quickly do.”

Into night, Judas flew.

Jesus broke more bread,

And he prayed and said:

“Take and eat this,

My body it is.”

He took the cup and said:

“Drink of this also my friends:

My precious blood it is

Shed for the remission of sins.”

After the supper being eaten

Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, and

Simon Peter said: “You shall not wash me!”

Jesus said: “Then you have no part with me.”

“Not only my feet, but my head, then!”

“But only feet need washing, after bathing.”

When they had sung a hymn in the house’s light

They departed toward Mount of Olives that night.

“Lord, I shall go with you through every cross and trial,”

Said Peter, when Jesus predicted his denial:
“I say you shall deny me thrice
Before the rooster will crow twice.”
Jesus said to the disciples, “Sit here,
While I go and pray over there.”
But He took both Peter and John
And James a little farther on.
“My soul is troubled,
The pain is doubled.”
Said Jesus in distress,
For truly He felt this:
His soul was drawn toward death,
Yes, e’en the point of death.
“Stay here and watch with me,”
Said Jesus to the three.
Then He fell on His face and prayed:
“Father, let this cup be laid
Not on Me, but still,
It’ll go as Your will.”
He found the disciples to be sleeping,
Not as He had told them to be keeping
Watch for his betrayer,
Who’d be coming later.
“Get up now!” he said,
They rose if from bed.
Then He prayed again
And returned again.
While they slept like in bed;
“Don’t be sleeping!” He said.
One final time he prayed
While fallen asleep they laid.
“Get up now, the time is come!
And my betrayer has come!”
Judas betrayed Him with a kiss
And Jesus was amazed at this.
A large crowd of chief priests came with clubs and with swords,
The disciples asked, “Should we fight back with our swords?”
Jesus replied no,
With the chief priests He goes.
The disciples full of dread
Far away from Him fled.
He was led by a chief priest
And marched to the high priest.
And when asked by the high priest,
He affirmed He was the Christ.
He said he really was the Son,
And not just any, but God’s Son.

But He said that later on
The Son would leave and be gone.
Sitting at the Right Hand in Power,
Among the clouds of Heaven with Power.
“Blasphemy this is!” screeched the high priest.
“You have heard what He has said, oh you chief priests!”
“He is deserving of death!” they replied.
“Prophecy who struck you, Christ!” they cried.
And with their palms they slapped Him,
And they spat on Him and beat Him.

Part Two: Crucifixion

As Peter warmed himself by the fire,
Said a girl who also was by the fire:
“You were also with Jesus of Galilee,
For your speech is that of a Galilean.”
“I do not know the man,” he said.
“But you were with him,” one more said.
“I do not know of whom you speak!”
“But just like him you now do speak.”
“Of what you say I do not know!”
And then a rooster gave a crow.
Then Peter remembered the word
That earlier had said his Lord:
“I say you shall deny me thrice
Before the rooster will crow twice.”
And then Peter went out and wept,
Bitterly down his face tears swept.
Jesus was given to Pilate
The people said unto Pilate:
“Release to us Barabbas!”
“Release to you Barabbas?”
“But then what shall I do with Jesus?”
“No evil has been done by Jesus!”
“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”
“Crucify Him? Crucify Him?”
But whatever evil has He done?”
“Oh, just crucify Him and be done!”
So He was delivered to be crucified,
As the people had wanted him crucified.
Jesus is mocked with a crown of thorns
As the women of Zion weep and mourn.
Then He was led to be crucified,
To hang on a cross until He died.
He got too tired to carry His cross,
So Simon of Cyrene then carried His cross.
Reaching the place of the skull

They gave him sour wine with gall.
 On the cross Him they did fix.
 And they divided His garments.
 When Pilate put up a sign that read:
 THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS
 Then many chief priests argued and said:
 "Write: He said He was the King of the Jews."
 "What just now I have written,"
 Said Pilate, "I have written.
 On Jesus' either side there lay
 A criminal who had come to pay.
 Said the one on his right:
 "Why with all your might,
 If the Christ you are
 Can you not save our
 And your very own life?
 Or shall we die in this strife,
 And right here hangeth dead?"
 But the other one said:
 "Justly we are here,
 But He who hangeth here,
 He has done nothing wrong,
 Yet still he hangeth long.
 Lord remember me when You come
 Into Heaven's holy kingdom."
 "Most assuredly I say to you,
 In Paradise with Me you'll be, too."
 From the sixth hour
 'Til the ninth hour
 Darkness fell around the land.
 Jesus spoke to John and said:
 "Your Mother, brother."
 "Your son, mother,"
 He spoke to his mother
 Who now was John's mother
 Jesus asked for a drink,
 And they gave Him a drink.
 And when He had finished
 He said, "It is finished.
 "Father into Your hands I commend My spirit!"
 And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

Part Three: Resurrection

Now early in the morning
 At the sun's early dawning
 A number of women
 Came seeking His tomb, and

They opened their eyes
From startling surprise.
Each of them let out a moan
For rolled away was the stone!
They went in and they found
No Jesus on the ground!
But appeared two shining men,
And afraid they were, then.
But as they bowed their faces to the earth.
The two young men proclaimed aloud with mirth:
“Why do you seek the living among the dead?
“He goes into Galilee as He once said.
“For He is not here but He is risen!”
But Mary Magdalene came there; when
She saw her Lord was gone
She didn’t know where He’d gone.
Now as she cried
Jesus stood by.
He said, “Why are you weeping?
And who are you seeking?”
She thought He was the gardener,
And fighting her tears harder,
Said, “They have taken my Lord.
Oh do you know where, oh Lord?”
Jesus answered, “Mary.”
“Rabboni!” said Mary.
“Please do not now cling to Me,
Say to the brothers of Me:
‘I go to my Father,
I go to your Father;
I go to my God,
I go to your God.’
Mary told the disciples: “I truly have seen the Lord!”
And she told the disciples what had been said by the Lord.

Victory from Death

By Rose MacPherson

The morning still was early,
Ere the sun began to rise.
Mary stands outside the tomb.
She stands there and she cries.
Nights ago, her Savior died,
Paid for all sins and her own.
He is Son of God Most High,
And of His death she groaned.
She turned aside and saw a man,
“For whom do you look?” He asked.
He looked familiar, but then again,
She thought He was the gardener.
He said unto her, “Mary.”
Then it was Jesus, she knew,
She said to Him, “Rabboni,”
Which means ‘master’ in Hebrew.
Mary wept no more that day,
For He had brought them victory:
Victory from death.

My Tree

By Zoe Middleton

In the summer
It's WAY funner
Climbing my tree
When there's no bees
Higher and higher
I can hear my dad say
I'm on fire
When its winter
It's like a sister
But in the spring
I'll sing
Why
Blooms
The flowers seem like brides
Waiting for their grooms
When I venture farther into the year
A flowery bed awaits me
I jump in without fear

The Artist

By Martha Price

The many wonderful colors,
All appearing with their might.
A lush breeze flows through the grass
and leaves the day out of sight.
Like paint on a canvas
Blended with a brush,
Only a skilled artist
Could create a world so lush.
Only when the sun sets
Is this natural beauty a sight.
When the moon rises the Sol falls
And the earth loses its light.
The colors show through clouds
Creating peace in the sky.
Many wonderful colors washing around the artist
Catching the human eye.
If only the painter could copy
A feeling of calm and peace.
He can only depict a beautiful sunset,
The time when animals begin to sleep.

Time

By Addie Ricke Young

I sit down and realize, I won't always be there.
Comfy all curled up, in my gray chair.
Life can be short, life can be long.
Life can be a never-ending blues song.
All people die, it's part of the human race.
We can't expect to always be in the same place.
This is the unstoppable force called time.
We won't always hear the wind chimes chime.
We won't always hear this poem rhyme.
We won't always have a spare nickel or dime.
The days drag on, while the years fly by.
We can't stop this cycle, no matter how hard we try.
But, we can stop ourselves and reminisce.
Stop and enjoy every warm mother's kiss.
Imagine what is yet to come, and stop yourself from feeling glum.
Time is precious, but you will not regret it if you take this time,
To boost you in this forever long climb.
This, is the best use of time.

Peace Comes at Night

By Andie Sanderson

Driving home and I got the news
School is canceled, it gave me the blues
Wish I could push days faster
But, the only things moving are my shoes
I should be screaming into a pillow
And I'm hoping that I'm dreaming
In a daze, I keep moving
Trying to reach a word to describe
This feeling
But. I. Can't.
Wake up. Breathe. School. Sleep
A never-ending cycle that I wish I could get beneath
Trying. Pushing. Perseverance.
Every day is the same
Why make your bed when nobody's coming?
Read. Read. Reading.
The thing I once loved, now I've stopped doing
Dream. Dream, they say but how can you dream
When you don't have enough space?
When will this change?
Will my life ever be the same?
Our new normal is being home every day
And I wish it would change!
Questions all in my head.
It is like my feet are lead,
The way I stay in one place
Trying to, trying to
Handle this with grace
Peace. Peace comes at night.

Moments

By Thomas Straka

Moments are time.
All day every day
They shine.
Time to make way.
What are moments?
They can be theirs or yours.
They are the movements
of the hours.
They can be happy or sad
They can be jealous
They can be angry or mad.
Moments are serious.

Anxiety

By Carly Wenninger

My heart filled with sorrow
Wishing there was no tomorrow
My eyes filling with burning tears
All my worries and fears
My throat choking up
Unable to breathe
I start to shake
From the words
“You can’t escape.”

My Little Sunflower

By Carly Wenninger

You said I was your flower.
My hair was gold as a sunflower
You would braid it all pretty, take care of me
As I grew old, you forgot to water me
But I just reminded you over and over again
Then, you got a new flower
A rose, red hair in braids.
As my hair grew darker and darker,
You forgot to water me more and more
You took me away from my sun
You stopped watering me.
Now I'm a shriveled up sunflower
When you try and braid my hair
I break.

Unspeakable Love

By Carly Wenninger

Love is so desiring
The love in my heart is backfiring
A kiss from you
Would be a dream come true
I confess to you
But you go to someone new
You left me heartbroken
Now this Love shall be Unspoken.

Fiction

Fiction (Imaginary/Fantasy):

Stories that describe imaginary events and people that entertain the reader with realistic details, involving characters who experience a conflict (ex: historical fiction, realistic fiction, fantasy, science fiction, mystery).

The Travelers

By Anden Brandt

It all started in a science lab in Washington D.C with two of the most well-known scientists in the world. They have lived in Washington D.C their whole lives. They have built many contraptions together such as a submarine, a flying car, a plane, a helicopter and many other things. They even built their very own robot named Captain DT35! Their names are Sarah and Josh, and they do everything together. They are best friends which is why they work in the same lab. To be more specific of what they do for a living, they are like engineers and they build stuff.

It's a Monday morning and they are at Jungle, Inc as usual. Last week, they had just started building a machine that shrinks something or makes something bigger.

"If I had to make something bigger, I would make myself bigger because I'm kind of short," Josh said, a little embarrassed.

Suddenly Captain DT35 burst into the room in sort of a panic, "So, how does it work?"

"Did you ever learn how to knock?" Sarah shouted angrily at Captain DT35.

"Well, you should know considering you built me," exclaimed Captain DT35 with a smirk on his screen.

"Whatever," Sarah scoffed, rolling her eyes. "It works by getting an item that you want to resize and then putting that item in the machine," she continued. "Then you select how big or small you want it and then press the green button."

"Cool, can I try it?" Captain DT35 said excitedly.

"No, sorry, it's not done yet," answered Josh. "But you can be the first one to try it when it is done!"

"Ok, cool!" Captain DT35 said happily as he walked away. "Bye."

"Alright, it's been a long day, I think I'm going to go home," Sarah exclaimed as she yawned.

"Ok, I will finish putting in these last few parts from this shipment then I will too," said Josh.

"Ok, bye!" said Sarah with a smile as she walked out the door. "I'll see you tomorrow." Sarah got in her car and drove off into the darkness.

Meanwhile Josh yawned as he finished putting the last pieces in the machine. The moon shined bright in the night sky as he thought to himself, "It's so quiet I—"

"Boo!" Captain DT35 shouted as he jumped out of a supply closet.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Josh screamed in surprise. "Jeez you scared me...hey, what are you doing here anyways?" Josh said looking puzzled. "I thought Sarah was supposed to take you home."

"She must have forgotten," said Captain DT35. "She looked pretty tired when she left."

"Yeah, she did. I guess I will take you home then," Josh said as they walked out the door and got into Josh's car.

The next day Josh got out of bed excited to finish the grow and shrinking machine. "This machine could change the world!" he thought to himself as he got dressed. Josh brushed his teeth, took a shower, ate breakfast and woke up Captain DT35 before getting in his car and driving to work. He got a call from Sarah.

"Hello?" Josh said.

"Hi Josh!" Sarah said happily.

"What's up?" asked Josh.

"My car broke down. Can you pick me up?" Sarah asked.

“Yeah, sure! I’ll be there in ten minutes,” said Josh.

“Ok, thanks! Bye!” Sarah said.

“Bye!” Said Josh.

When Josh got to Sarah’s house, he honked the horn a few times to signal that he was there.

“I’m coming!” Sarah yelled as she opened the door. She opened the car door, plopped her stuff down and got in.

“What happened to your car?” asked Josh.

“It won’t start.” Sarah complained.

“Oh, by the way you forgot to bring Captain DT35 home last night,” Josh reminded Sarah as they drove to work.

“Oh, I did? I must have been too tired to remember,” Sarah said, looking a little confused.

“Yeah, I had to spend a night at this weirdo’s house,” Captain DT35 snapped.

“Oh please, it was just one night,” sneered Josh.

“Whatever,” sighed Captain DT35.

When they got to Jungle, Inc. they walked into the lab and got to work. After hours of work, they finally finished the machine.

“Is it done yet?” gushed Captain DT35.

“Yes, it is!” shouted Josh in excitement.

“YAY!” yelled Captain DT35 eager to resize himself. He got inside the machine and pushed the green button. 3...2...1! The machine started running but when the smoke cleared, they saw that Captain DT35 was not there.

“Where did he go?” stuttered Josh.

“I’m going to try it now,” blurted Sarah.

“I’ll come with you,” stuttered Josh.

They pushed the button and the machine started rumbling and filling the room with smoke. When the smoke cleared, they were in a whole other dimension.

“Where are we?” gasped Sarah.

They looked around to try and figure out where in the world they were. That is, until they saw a massive dinosaur!

“Oh my gosh! It’s a dinosaur!” yelled Sarah.

“Wait, are you guys thinking what I’m thinking?” Josh asked Sarah and Captain DT35.

“We just invented time travel!” the three said simultaneously.

“We have to tell everybody!” Sarah babbled.

“Sarah, that’s the last thing we would want to do,” insisted Josh.

“We would make a ton of money if we did!” gushed Sarah.

“That’s true, but if we told everyone I can almost guarantee you that someone will try to rob us,” exclaimed Josh. “So, let’s just keep it a secret between you, Captain DT35 and me, ok?” asked Josh. “This is going to be good.”

The next day at work Sarah approached Josh and sat down next to him while he ate his lunch. “I have been thinking about all the different things we could change in the world! We could go and save Abe Lincoln, we could save John F. Kennedy, and even my favorite two rappers Juice WRLD or XXXTentacion!”

“We could do that, but it would take a lot of planning and equipment,” exclaimed Josh.

At that moment their boss came into the room and told them that they got a report about a hidden treasure and that they need to go and get it ASAP!

“Uh, sure where is it?” the three of them asked.

“You have to go back in time,” said their boss.

“Ok, wait how do you know about our time machine?” Josh rebuked.

“Oh, Captain DT35 told me about it,” exclaimed their boss.

“Captain, I told you not to tell anyone!” yelled Sarah.

“I’m sorry I just got really excited about it and I just had to tell someone!” blurted Captain DT35.

“Well, next time don’t, ok?” said Sarah.

“Alright let’s go find this treasure!” said Josh excitedly.

When they traveled there, they called their boss and asked him where the treasure was.

“It’s in a hidden temple,” said their boss. There will be a dragon guarding it so be careful.”

“Ok we are on it!” exclaimed Josh.

Seven hours later Josh said, “Reporting back to Jungle, Inc.”

“I think we found it!” Sarah yelled. “Wow, that’s a big temple! It reminds me of the Indiana Jones series.”

“Yeah, it does,” said Josh. “But we need to get moving.”

When the three got to the top of the staircase they stared at the treasure in amazement.

“Wow, it’s so... shiny!” Sarah gasped as her jaw dropped to the floor.

“Let’s hurry up and get it because we don’t have much time!” Josh said eagerly.

As they approached the treasure, they heard a loud rumbling noise.

“What was that?!” Sarah stuttered.

“I don’t know but it can’t be anything good!” yelled Josh.

Suddenly a humongous dragon fell from through the roof.

“Oh my gosh!” Sarah screamed. “Run!”

“No!” Josh yelled. “We came for the treasure and that’s what we are going to get! Captain, use your net gun!”

“I’m on it!”

Captain DT35 shot his grapple gun at the dragon and it got it pinned to the ground. They quickly grabbed the treasure and started running. The dragon got out of the net and started chasing them. It was breathing fire and catching up to them, but they got to the time machine just in time.

“We got the treasure boss,” panted Josh.

“Perfect!” said their boss. “I’ll keep this safe.”

“Just a reminder, we are never going back there ever again,” exclaimed Sarah. “It was complete chaos!”

“All that matters is that we have the treasure and that it is safe,” exclaimed their boss.

At that moment they heard a rumbling noise followed by a roar coming from the time machine.

“Oh no.” the four said simultaneously

To be continued...

The Start of Freddy and Cali's Adventures

By Aidric Calderon

It all started by the ocean. There was a small village located on an island off the coast of the Bahamas. There was a lot of ocean-lined beach at this village. There were also two dogs, Cali and Freddy. Freddy was a German shepherd and Cali was a Doberman. They did not know each other yet.

Cali was at the ocean swimming and she noticed these random square waves in the water, but she didn't think anything of it. Cali also noticed this other dog running.

"Hi," she yelped.

The other dog, whose name was Freddy, replied to Cali, "Hi, we should probably get out of here."

"Why?" Cali asked.

"Oh, you know those square waves out there?" the dog mentioned.

"Yeah," Cali exclaimed, wondering what this other dog was thinking.

"Well, those are signs of a tsunami!"

"What?!" Cali screamed as they ran away from the water.

They heard a rumbling sound right behind them! They saw a little golf cart and Cali ran even faster to get to it. She got in and then picked up Freddy.

"Floor it!" he yelled.

The golf cart did a wheelie and Cali almost fell off! They made it past Miami but they noticed that the golf cart was on low fuel, so they got out and ran all the way to Georgia where they were safe. Well, they thought...

One year later, Cali and Freddy were still best buds and they thought alike. They were low on money and they were looking around for jobs to do, so they went to the beach. There were two slots open for lifeguard training. They completed the training, got hired and they started out as casual lifeguards getting paid \$14 per hour.

About two weeks later they got promotions. Now they taught little puppies how to swim. They had a group of four mixed golden retrievers and Siberian huskies. Everyone in the city thought they were really cute. So, they were really lucky to have that group of puppies. They worked hard with them teaching the four puppies to be strong swimmers at the beach.

On the last day of swimming lessons, Freddy and Cali took the puppies to the fair in Moonlight City. They were in line for the Zero Gravity ride. It was really crowded and loud because of all the screaming. The reason it was so crowded was because there was a discount on tickets and an exciting new ride.

"Can we go to the hot dog stand? I promise I'll get you a box of pizza rolls," said Cali.

"No", Freddy said, "We're almost there."

Five minutes later they made it to the ride and got on. The ride's nails were loose and then it slipped off and they started rolling away! Everyone was screaming but then Cali had an idea. She unbuckled herself and tore off the seat belt and tied it onto the ride. She let go of the seat belt and it caught onto a little metal anchor in the ground. The ride stopped moving! Cali saved the day! The puppies and everyone on the ride were safe!

Two days later the fair was over, and fall was soon to come. Freddy and Cali were just sitting down eating fried butter on a stick watching the news. Someone got the recording of the security cameras at the fair and they saw what Cali did. They announced on the news that they are going to deliver \$3 million to her as a reward for saving the puppies and everyone on the Zero Gravity ride. Cali was so excited

and told Freddy she would share the reward money with him. They decided to do something to help the people in Moonlight City.

“You know what we need in this town that we don’t already have?” asked Cali.

“No, not really,” Freddy replied.

“A big pool!” Cali said.

Freddy thought, “Oh no, that’s going to cost a fortune!”

Cali donated \$2.5 million to the Moonlight City Council and they built a pool right next to Moonlight Dog Elementary School. It was free to get in so a lot of times at gym class they would go over to the pool and most of the dogs had now learned to swim. At this same time, the climate was changing, and the entire Arctic and North and South poles were beginning to melt. The news started reporting that the coastal waters in Florida and California were rising by about two feet per minute! They started gathering supplies to build a raft.

They had the blueprint for a pretty good boat but there weren’t enough seats for that many dogs. They found an abandoned speed boat and took two motors and four seats from the boat. They attached these parts onto the raft. Next, they chopped down a couple palm trees for firewood to cook with. Then they saw a mountain and decided to drive their golf cart over to it to get some rock. They used the rock and the palm tree wood to make fishing poles and paddles.

They noticed that the water was starting to rise right next to them! They got on their raft and started floating away. They waited for the water to get about 10 feet high before starting the two motors. They saw a little yellow glowing fish that they thought was really cute. They caught it with their fishing net to save the little fish. They had a little aquarium on the raft and put the yellow glowing fish inside to keep him safe after filling it with water. Freddy and Cali saw several dogs swimming around in front of their raft. The dogs swam toward their raft and climbed on with their help. They realized that they still didn’t have enough seats, so they started looking around the water and saw another abandoned yacht with eight seats.

They tied the yacht to the back of their raft. Then they caught some fish with the other dogs’ help and cooked them for dinner. They went fishing using nets and caught a bunch of shrimp, which they saved for later. Suddenly there was a huge hurricane right behind them!

“What should we do?” Cali yelled to Freddy.

“Let’s figure out how to drain all this water out of the atmosphere,” Freddy explained as he looked over at Cali. “How are we gonna do that?” Freddie asked.

Cali noticed a garden hose slowly drifting away. “Hey, over there is a garden hose!” Cali screamed as she pointed to it. She then grabbed it and pulled it into the boat. The water kept getting higher and higher and they could see the edge of the atmosphere! Then Freddy had an idea, so he grabbed the hose, put part of it in the water and put the other side into the atmosphere. It was draining really fast, and they saw the top of One World Trade Center in New York while they took off on their makeshift boat in Florida!

They decided to go down all the way to the streets so they could find food and other things they needed. They went to a hotel and decided to stay there so they opened the door and water went everywhere but it dried up pretty quickly. They wondered why the water had dried up so fast. They waited one whole day to actually sleep in there, so they slept on the towels from the boat that night. Then they just started living in the hotel. But then, they realized, oh no! A drought!

To be continued...

My Not-So-Boring Day

By Zariah DeBerry

I grab my backpack as the bus pulls up to my stop. I walk down the steps. Today was pretty boring. We didn't learn anything new or interesting in any of my classes. I wish my life was more exciting. I walk up my driveway to my front steps and am about to open my front screen door when something shiny catches my eye. I look around but there is no one else around, no cars are driving around either.

The shiny thing catches my eye again. I walk down my steps and set my backpack down on the walkway. I spy the shiny thing in the grass under my front yard birch tree. I walk over to it and bend down to get a better look. What is that? It's reflecting the sun too much for me to get a good look at it. I nudge the thing with my toe and the light from the sun stops bouncing off of it. It's a crystal of some kind.

The crystal is a bright, beautiful blue color. I've never seen one like this. It is light in shade and cut into the shape of an octagon. I wonder what kind of gem this is. I know that gems don't grow naturally cut like that so someone must have cut it. What is this thing even doing in my front yard anyway? It shouldn't even be here. I reach down and pick up the gem. It's bottom and top are flat and smooth. It's pretty light but has a nice weight to it.

The gem starts glowing! Why is it glowing?! I'm tempted to drop it but something inside me tells me not to. I clutch the gem in my hand. I can still see the bright blue light through the cracks in my fingers. I feel the ground under me start to shift. It can't be an earthquake. Minnesota doesn't get earthquakes. I try to fight my growing panic. I have just enough time to look down and scream as a blue swirling portal opens up under my feet. I start to plummet into a swirling blue and white chasm. I scream as my heart shoots into my throat and my stomach starts to do cartwheels.

One of my fears is falling from heights. Combine that with my bad depth perception and you have me, panicking, screaming and falling into a blue and white mass of nothingness. I bite my lip to keep from screaming more as my mask falls off my face and floats away. There's no gravity in here.

I glance down and spot another swirling blue portal. I shoot through the second portal. I can hear wind whistling in my ears as I fall. I start screaming again and I squeeze my eyes shut. If I'm going to die, I'd rather not have my eyes open for it. Granted I'm also way too young to die. I wait for the impact of the ground and my death, but nothing ever comes.

By all accounts I should be dead. I open my eyes and look to see the grass. I glance at my arms to see that I'm surrounded in blue light. What? Why am I glowing? I look at the hand still holding the crystal. The crystal's bright blue light is still glowing through my hand. It must be magic if it's keeping me in the air like this. Wait, no, that's crazy! Magic doesn't exist, even if I want it to, more than almost anything. But on the other hand, I just fell through a weird portal thing, fell through the sky, and am now floating. Maybe magic does exist. Maybe it's just kept hidden from non-magicals, like in Harry Potter. Maybe the crystal I'm holding is a magic artifact.

The glow from the crystal goes dim and I'm falling again. This time I only fall for five seconds before I hit the grassy ground roughly. I groan and roll over onto my back. I lay staring at the sky for a minute letting the pain ebb away from my body. When the pain is gone, I sit up and check myself over for bruises, cuts and broken bones. Huh, I'm okay. That's good. That's very good and lucky.

Where am I anyway? I stand up and brush myself off. I frown at the absence of my winter coat. Maybe the portal threw it off like it did with my mask. I stare at the now not glowing blue crystal in my hand.

“Where did you take me?” I ask the crystal. This is ridiculous. I shouldn’t be talking to an inanimate object. It’s not like it’s going to answer me. If it did, I’d probably have a heart attack.

The sounds of the birds singing and chirping to each other finally register in my ears. That’s good. If it was dead silent, I’d probably go crazy. I hate it when it’s too quiet. I tend to freak out if there’s no noise around.

Let’s see where I am though. It might give me an idea of how to get home before my family freaks out. I look around and what I see takes my breath away. I’m standing in the middle of a large clearing in a forest. The trees are large and look like they’d belong in a fantasy forest in a movie. The leaves in the trees are green but they ombre down to other colors the farther they get from the branch. Sprouting from the ground at the bottom of the trees are large, glowing, pink, purple and blue crystals.

I hear a screech overhead and look up in time to see a large, golden eagle fly over my head. What in the heck is going on?! I can’t be in some magical forest. They don’t exist in my world. Unless...

“Did you send me to another dimension?” I ask the crystal. Of course, I don’t get a response. Other dimensions don’t exist, do they?

I look around again. This place is beautiful. I wonder what kinds of magical creatures live here. It looks like this place would be inhabited by fairies, but it is another dimension so anything and everything could live here. I can’t be here! I have to go home! I love that this place is magical, but I don’t belong here. I should be careful around anyone I meet because of “stranger danger,” but whoever I meet could help me find my way home.

I start walking. I walk into the tree line and feel my skin tingle as I walk past a cluster of crystals. It wasn’t a bad tingle though. It was more of a good tingle, like when you get excited goosebumps.

I continue to look around as I walk. The trees are very tall here. I step over a log and almost jump out of my skin when I hear a twig snap. I glance down and see that I stepped on the twig. Phew! Nothing dangerous is coming. I keep walking but stop when I hear the bushes to my left start to shake. I freeze and my heart starts to beat faster as I try to hold down my panic and not scream or start running. What is it? Please don’t be a bear or a moose or a pack of wolves. Please don’t be something dangerous. Please don’t be something dangerous. Please don’t be something dangerous.

My hand tightens around the gem and I ready myself into a stance to run if I need to. The bushes rustle again and out of them steps a woman. The woman is as tall as my mom with pale skin, violet eyes and black shoulder length hair with purple ends. She’s wearing brown hiking boots, black pants and a white shirt with wavy, loose-fitting sleeves. A black cloak with a golden clasp is hanging from her shoulders. Attached to her belt is a 12-inch wooden stick with a five-pointed star and the initials K.P. carved into the handle. She has a satchel slung over her shoulder. The woman looks at me and tilts her head to the side, a puzzled look crossing her face.

“Hi,” I say. She doesn’t look very dangerous or mean for that matter. She has soft, kind-looking facial features. The woman raises an eyebrow at me. Maybe she speaks a different language.

“You are not from here, are you young one?” asks the woman. She has a thin British accent. Our styles of clothing are drastically different. Hers are old fashioned and fantasy-esk and mine are modern and casual.

“No. No, I am not,” I say. I have a feeling lying to her wouldn’t work anyway. She has very inquisitive eyes.

“What is your name?” asks the woman.

“Zariah. Zariah DeBerry. Who are you?” I ask.

“I am Kaisa Persevel, but you may call me Kaisa,” says the woman.

“Okay, Kaisa. It’s nice to meet you,” I say holding out my hand. Kaisa reaches forward and grabs my hand and shakes it. Her hand is soft and gentle, but she has a firm grip.

“Now tell me Zariah, what are you doing here? You are clearly not from this world based on your clothes alone. Why are you here?” asks Kaisa.

“Truthfully, I picked up this crystal, it started glowing, and I fell through a portal. I thought I was going to die because I was falling through the sky. Then I realized I was floating. I fell, then started walking, and met you,” I say holding up the crystal for Kaisa to see.

Kaisa twirls her left pointer finger and the gem floats over to her hand. Oh my gosh! She’s a witch!

“You’re a witch! That was cool!” I say.

Kaisa raises an eyebrow at me.

“Sorry, magic doesn’t really exist in my world. It’s just stories where I come from. We have books, movies and TV shows about magic, witches, wizards and magical creatures. People can’t do magic where I come from and most people don’t even think it’s real,” I say.

“What are movies and TV shows?” asks Kaisa.

“They’re forms of entertainment. But that was cool,” I say. Magic exists in this world, that has got to be the coolest thing ever!

“Oh well, thank you. This crystal that brought you here is radiating a very large amount of light magic. It is definitely powerful enough to send you to another dimension. But magical objects only send people to other dimensions if they are actively being used by that person or if that person has some magical destiny connected to them in some way. The magic will send you to somewhere you should be or are needed. You clearly don’t know what you’re doing so I’d say you have some kind of magical destiny,” says Kaisa.

“I have a magical destiny! That is so so cool!” I say excitedly. I can’t believe I have a magical destiny. I could be the chosen one like Harry Potter. I wonder if I’ll have to sacrifice myself like he did to defeat an evil person.

Kaisa chuckles at my excitement and hands the crystal back to me. “I’d keep that crystal close, you’ll most likely need it,” says Kaisa.

“Wait, if I have a magical destiny shouldn’t I learn some magic. Will you teach me magic?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t see why not. I could use an apprentice. You can help me out around my home doing various tasks and I’ll teach you magic. Does that sound good?” asks Kaisa, holding out a hand.

“That sounds awesome!” I say, shaking her hand.

“Follow me Zariah,” says Kaisa, gesturing to me before beginning to walk away.

“Okay,” I say. I begin to follow Kaisa through the enchanted forest towards my magical destiny...

A Dream Come True

By Jordyn Earl

These are the days that changed Mariah's life forever. Mariah always dreamt of having superpowers ever since she saw her first superhero movie. Mariah is from Sanibel Island, Florida and lives alone. Her parents died in a car crash, and no one knows who hit them, but they taught her everything, so she wanted to live on her own. She is very independent, kind, caring and funny! She cherishes her friends deeply and cares for them when they need it. Now she's a normal 15-year-old girl and in ninth grade.

Then one day something huge happened. Mariah had just woken up after dreaming about her favorite superhero, Magnetina. It was the weekend and she had planned to hang out with her friends at the boardwalk. She got dressed, brushed her teeth, grabbed her purse and phone, and dashed out of her house. She arrived at the boardwalk and met her friends. Mariah then realized that she had left her money back at her house.

"Ugh!" Mariah cried.

"What is it?" asked her best friend Kayla.

"I left my money at home! I wish I could fly. That would be way faster than walking!"

Just as Mariah said that she began to fly! Heads started turning her way and her friends were shocked. Mariah also looked shocked. Her jaw dropped.

"Oh my gosh! I'm flying!" Mariah yelled.

Even more people started staring at her. Her other friends, Jess and Ariana, also stared at her. People whipped out their phones and began taking pictures and videos! Mariah didn't want to be "The Next Big Thing," so instead of waiting, she flew down to her friends and grabbed them. One friend was on her back and she was holding the other two friends by their hands.

"We have to get out of here!" Mariah whined. Ten minutes later they arrived at Mariah's house and they talked and hung out.

"Don't you want to be famous?" Kayla asked.

"No, because..." Mariah stopped to think.

"See, you don't even know why!" Ariana teased.

"No! I know exactly why!" Mariah squealed.

"Well then tell us!" Jess added.

"Alright. I don't like having cameras on me 24/7! Oh, and all the interviews!" Mariah said.

"C'mon you can't turn something that big down!" Kayla said.

"Alright, but I won't have any time left to hang out with you guys," Mariah said in a sly voice.

"Oh no, you should stay. We totally understand how it might feel. Now please stay!" all of her friends pleaded.

"Ha, ha that's what I thought! Maybe I should give myself a disguise though," Mariah slyly added.

"What kind of a disguise, Mariah?" Kayla asked.

"Like..." Mariah had to think once again.

"You always have to think about something before you say it!" Ariana fumed in an annoyed voice.

"Stop it! I have an idea. I was thinking like a crazy rainbow wig, like what clowns wear! And then one of the glasses that are connected to a fake nose, big bushy eyebrows and a big bushy mustache!" Mariah and all her friends burst into laughter.

"Are you serious?" Kayla laughed.

“Yes, and that’s the worst part!” Mariah started crying because she was laughing so hard.

Little did Mariah know that she had every single power.

Mariah’s best friend, Kayla was 16 years old, so she drove Mariah and her other friends to the store to buy the disguise. Luckily Halloween was around the corner so there were tons of items Mariah could use to use for her disguise. They walked into the store and went to where the costumes were.

“I wish I could just be invisible.” Mariah murmured. Once again, Mariah did as she wished and turned invisible.

“Mariah? Where are you?” her friends asked.

“I’m invisible!” Mariah said in a shocked voice.

“Well, now we don’t have to buy you any disguises! Bummer,” Kayla said with her back slouched.

“Yeah,” Jess said, frowning.

The next day Mariah woke up at 6:15 a.m. She got dressed, made breakfast and brushed her teeth after eating. She decided to practice and see if she had every power imaginable. It turns out she did. Mariah decided to call her friends on a Snapchat group call. Mariah explained everything.

“No way, Mariah!” Kayla screeched.

“I know, right?!” Mariah said excitedly.

“I have an idea! Mariah and Kayla will love it!” Jess said happily after everyone calmed down.

“What is it, Jess?” All three of the girls asked.

“Since Mariah and Kayla have always wanted to be twins, they can be!” Jess said very excitedly.

“Yay!” Mariah and Kayla screeched. Then Mariah transformed into a clone of Kayla.

“Oh my gosh, you look just like me!” Kayla screamed.

“I know!” Mariah squealed

The girls met up at the boardwalk once again and talked about what to do. Mariah came up with the idea to make Kayla look like Mariah and that Mariah would stay as Kayla and that they could basically switch lives for a day!

“Oh my gosh, that’s an amazing idea!” Kayla yelled.

Mariah turned Kayla into a clone of herself and stayed as a clone of Kayla. The girls had school the next day but of course they stayed at their own houses. They also kept their own personal belongings like their phones, wallets, etc.

The next day the girls had school and were very nervous to go to school. They swapped schedule papers and walked around school quietly so they wouldn’t draw any attention to themselves. They both eventually found their way to each other’s first class. Neither of them could talk without stuttering.

“Pssst. Kayla!” said one of Kayla’s other friends that Mariah didn’t know. Mariah just decided to ignore the girl, but she wouldn’t stop trying to get her attention.

“Lilyana, please stop trying to whisper to Kayla. You want to learn, don’t you, Miss Johnson?” Ms. Wilson warned.

“Ye-ye-yes ma’am,” Mariah said nervously.

“Are you feeling alright, Kayla? You never stutter. Why don’t you go down to the office and rest. You are my star student,” said the teacher, Ms. Wilson.

Mariah walked down to the office slowly. She tiptoed down the stairs and didn’t talk at all. The nurse wasn’t there so she just walked to one of the cots. A few minutes later the nurse arrived. She had dark brown hair and green eyes. She was wearing a jean jacket and a black and white striped shirt. She had black leggings and light-yellow slippers.

“How can I help you, Kayla?” asked the nurse.

“Th-the teacher s-s-sent me,” Mariah said nervously.

“Oh my! I can already see why! You never stutter!” The nurse cried, shocked. The nurse took Mariah’s temperature, gave her a glass of water and let her rest. A while later Kayla walked in!

“Hey Mariah! Erm, I mean h-h-hey Mariah,” Mariah called while winking at Kayla.

“Hey Kaylam,” Kayla said with her hands over her stomach. Both girls fell asleep on their cots. Eventually both the girls woke up to a bell ringing. They had just slept through the whole school day. Then Ms. Wilson walked in the room.

“How are you doing, Kayla? And Mariah of course!” Ms. Wilson asked.

“We’re doing better. Way better,” Kayla said.

“You girls should get rest once you get home,” Ms. Wilson suggested. Once the girls got all their stuff from their lockers they met at the back of the school and changed back to their normal selves again.

“What a day that was! I was nervous all day!” Mariah stated.

“Yeah, I got a stomachache right when I entered the building!” Kayla added. As soon as the girls finished talking, Mariah’s phone buzzed. She got a text from Ariana.

The text read, “Hey! Where are you and Kayla? Jess and I are at the front of the school waiting! Hurry up!”

“We better get going. Jess and Ariana are waiting at the front,” Mariah suggested.

“Alright, I’m pooped though. We should have a sleepover!” Kayla also suggested.

“Ooh, yeah! We can have pizza, soda, candy and watch movies! I have the perfect movie!” Mariah added.

“Ha, ha. That sounds good. What movie though?” Kayla questioned.

“Magnetina vs. Tyrannosaurus Titan!” Mariah squealed.

“Of course that’s it. Why should I even have asked?” Kayla laughed.

The girls walked to the front of the school together and met up with Jess and Ariana. They explained their idea of having a sleepover and Jess and Ariana were excited to be included. The girls decided to have it at Kayla’s house since she had a 70-inch TV. A few hours after packing, the girls were ready to go. Kayla was the only one with a driver’s license since she was a grade above them, so she picked them all up. They stopped at the store and picked up treats. Once the girls arrived, they grabbed their bags and each claimed a spot to relax at.

“I’m so excited to watch the movie!” Mariah stated excitedly.

“Yeah, it’s only like your 50th time watching it!” Kayla giggled.

Mariah sighed and laughed. “Y’know, I don’t think I’m ever going to switch places with you again, Kayla. Your friend wouldn’t stop trying to whisper to me!” Mariah blurted randomly during the movie.

“Shhhhhh!” all of her friends spat.

For the rest of the night the girls talked and chatted.

“I think all these powers of mine will only be used for the greater good. Or just for fun. Probably never anything huge like switching spots with Kayla for a day!” Mariah announced.

“Agreed,” Kayla responded.

“What should we do now? I am bored. I feel like we have done everything imaginable!” Ariana complained.

“Wait. I just got the best idea ever!” Mariah yelled.

“What? Usually all of your superpower ideas end up being a mess!” the rest of the group questioned.

“If I have every power imaginable then I can make you guys have some powers, then if you have powers, we can be superheroes!” Mariah screeched. All the girls started squealing. Mariah gave Kayla laser eyes and zero gravity power, Jess had freeze ray hands and flying powers, and Ariana had super strength and super jump!

The girls had taken sewing lessons a few years ago so they made superhero suits. Kayla’s was blue and green striped with a mask that covered her whole face, Jess had a pink and light-yellow suit with a flower hair bow and a pink and yellow mask that only covered her eyes, Ariana had a black and purple suit with a hood that had cat ears since she loved cats, and last but definitely not least was Mariah.

She had a suit that was all black with a grey belt and a black and grey striped mask with fancy black glasses. She had a whole bunch of items on her belt like a grappling hook, a bubblegum pack with super sticky gum so she could chew it and throw it at the enemy so they would stick to something. She had a teleportation button and finally a glitter bomb. When you threw it, it exploded with glitter which made it hard to see though it is not harmful. The girls were ready to kick some butt.

The girls stared off into the distance, silently. Until someone broke the silence.

“There it is, our first client,” Mariah slyly stated as she stood up.

“What are you talking about?” The girls asked.

“You’ll see if you follow me,” Mariah said quietly.

The girls followed Mariah and she led them to a roaring chocolate monster! Mariah threw a glitter bomb, Ariana picked up the monster and Jess froze it! He eventually broke free and began roaring loudly and angrily. The monster jumped up and over a building running away. The girls all chased him. Then Mariah had an idea.

“Guys, I have an idea! Since he’s a chocolate monster we could try to lead him into a huge bowl of boiling water! Then he will melt!” Mariah whispered so the chocolate monster wouldn’t hear.

“Perfect idea!” the rest of the group whispered back. There was a pasta restaurant and there was a huge bowl of fake pasta above it, so the girls took out the fake pasta and filled the bowl with burning hot water. The girls then began taunting the monster and eventually he started running over to them. The girls had a big rope so they could make him trip into the water. He tripped over the rope as planned and fell into the burning water. He began to melt and the water turned brown. The girls defeated him! Everyone around them began to cheer.

The girls continued to be superheroes and help others. They made people smile and even movies were made about them! And nobody knows their identities except them. There are countless villains they have fought like Marshmallow Man, Sneakers, Guitaria, Darci Drummer, Tyrone Teleporter, and many, many more. Too many to say.

Shoes

By Claire Elness

Eleven-year-old Kristin Miller was not excited for school to start. She had moved over the summer. Since she was going into sixth grade, she had to start middle school. Scary.

She sat in the back of the car, staring out the window as her mom drove her siblings and her to go back-to-school shopping. It was raining. Pouring, really. At least it matched her mood. Her older sister Maya was going on and on about how exciting high school would be and how tenth grade would be “the best year ever.” Yeah, right. Kristin would give anything to live with her parents together. But no. They got divorced right at the end of last year and now she only got to see her dad every other weekend. Meanwhile, Evan, her little brother, was reading off all the signs they passed, obviously excited for second grade.

“How about you, Kris? Are you excited for middle school?” her mother asked, as if middle school was a good thing.

“Eh,” she shrugged, not moving her gaze from out the window. She bit her fingernails, like she always did when she thought about school and other terrifying things.

“Of course you’re excited, Kristy,” Maya butted in, using Kristin’s dumb pet name. “When I was in sixth grade, I made a bunch of friends, and so will you!”

Oh, Kristin had plenty of friends. At her old school. And they would get to go to scary middle school together, and she bet it would even be fun for them. But no. Maya wouldn’t understand. She had a gazillion friends and would have no problem making more. She was pretty and popular, and she excelled at every class and sport she did.

“Oh yeah, I’m excited,” she lied, tired of Maya’s excited oblivious-ness and her mom’s worry. “I was just thinking about last year’s first day of school.”

Kristin would much rather read a good book any time than go to school. Sure, her classes weren’t super hard, but that was exactly the problem. She needed a challenge. That’s what her teacher had said last year. Kristin, why can’t you be more like Maya? is what the teacher had definitely been thinking. Well, she was used to that.

About twenty minutes later, they got to the mall. They went into Target and got all their supplies. Maya also convinced Mom to get her some clothes. Clothes, clothes, clothes. Maya was always thinking about clothes. Kristin had no idea how she managed to fit them all in her dresser. Kristin, however, did not like clothes shopping. Nothing ever looked as good on her as it did on Maya, who could wear a burlap sack and still look flawless. Maya was always wearing the trendiest clothes, but somehow made it look natural and not contrived. Kristin could never pull that off. Heck, she only ever knew what was “cool” at a given time based off of Maya’s tastes.

Kristin looked down at her worn-out jeans and navy-blue Mickey Mouse shirt, and her old pink Crocs, then at Maya’s black turtleneck and white denim skirt, and shrunk a little. She knew what was coming next before Maya even said it.

“Mom, can we get Kristy some fresh clothes, too? She’s been wearing the same things since like third grade.”

Please say no, please say no, please say no!

“Sure, I don’t see why not. Kris? You want some new clothes?”

No, as a matter of fact, I do not. “Um, sure Mom. That would be great,” Kristin said, preparing herself for becoming Maya’s personal fashion show.

Maya squealed and grabbed Kristin’s arm. “How ‘bout we meet you at the entrance in an hour, and you can take Evan?”

Their mom nodded, “Come on Evan. Don’t you want to get some more grown-up second-grader things?”

As Maya dragged her along, Kristin wondered at how the two sisters could be blood-related but be such polar opposites. Kristin had shoulder-length curly dark brown hair and blue eyes, and Maya had wavy blond hair that stretched halfway down her back, and pretty brown eyes, too. Maya was average height with the perfect body. Kristin was tall and gangly, and she was almost the same height as Maya, regardless of the fact that Maya was 15, and four years older.

“Ooh, I’m going to find you the perfect clothes, Kristy! You’re going to look so good!”

Kristin sighed, accepting her fate. There was nothing to be done when Maya got excited like this than to let her dress you up and get it over with.

Maya’s ideal day was one spent shopping, swimming and talking with friends, which was basically all she’d done that summer. Kristin had spent all summer reading “Harry Potter” in their hammock, pretending to watch Evan as he played in the pool or on the trampoline, or both. On rainy days she’d spent all day watching movies in the attic. Her personal favorites were Star Wars.

As they walked through the store, Maya was talking a mile a minute about the things she’d be getting Kristin. They finally got to the clothes, and Kristin stood a little straighter when she realized that they were in the “juniors” section, not the “kids” section. Maya walked around feeling different options and grabbing anything that she approved of.

Kristin daydreamed about books. She loved books. Especially “Harry Potter.” She’d hardly put them down all summer and had reread them once already since the first time and was in the middle of them again. Her dad had watched the movies with her. She got to watch one each time they visited. They’d already watched the whole series. She smiled, thinking about her dad. He had dark hair just like Kristin, and brown eyes like Maya. Evan looked exactly like pictures of their dad when he was little.

“Kristin Miller!” Maya shouted, shaking Kristin from her daydream. “Try these on, dear.” She handed Kristin a large pile of clothes, and Kristin had trouble seeing with the mountain in front of her. She walked into the dressing room and tried every piece on, walking out for Maya each time. Maya ended up picking a few outfits for her, but there was only one outfit that Kristin really liked. This was the first time Kristin had ever actually found something she liked while shopping for clothes. She caught up to Maya as she started walking through the aisles, heading to the checkouts.

“Wait,” Kristin said, “What about shoes?”

“Shoes? I suppose we can pick some out,” Maya replied, stopping so abruptly that Kristin walked into her.

They went over to the shoes and Maya started trying things on. Kristin didn’t like anything Maya suggested, but she kept looking anyway. And then she saw them. A beautiful pair of shoes that were very familiar. She picked up the black Converse. They had gold and silver hearts on them and were the same ones she’d worn when she had started kindergarten. She’d been so scared because she didn’t have any friends, but her parents had assured her that everything would be okay and bought her these shoes to help her feel more excited.

“I want these,” Kristin announced, and Maya looked up from the boots she was trying on.

“Ooh, those are pretty cute,” she said, and walked over to find Kristin’s size. “Here,” she said, holding a box with size 6 in it.

Kristin tried them on and immediately knew they were the ones. They were so comfortable, and she never wanted to take them off. “I’ll wear them out of the store,” she said.

“Hang on, Kristy,” Maya said, changing out of the boots she had half-on as Kristin started to walk out of the aisle. Maya picked up the boots and caught up to her. Kristin smiled as she went towards the entrance of the store.

“Excited, are we?” Maya asked, grinning when Kristin turned her face away. “Well, no need to defend yourself,” Maya said, grabbing her hand.

The thing was, Kristin somehow was excited now. Maybe Maya’s bubbly personality was rubbing off on her, or maybe it was the shoes. Or both. But she wasn’t as scared of middle school anymore. Maybe she’d even make some new friends! She hoped they’d share her love of pizza.

When they got to the doors, Kristin heard her mom before she saw her. She was on the phone, probably with Kristin’s dad. “No, of course not. Why? Well, Maya’s super excited, and so is Evan, but Kris is still being sulky. I don’t know how to make her realize that she has to get used to this. She doesn’t want to go to school at all.”

As she heard this, Kristin shrunk down a little. Was that what people thought of her? A burden? Sulky, like her mom had said? She thought about it and realized that she had been kind of angry over the summer and ever since her parents got divorced. She looked up at Maya, her happy mood disappearing.

“Am I annoying, Maya?” she asked, as Maya put her arms around her for a hug.

“Of course not. And you’re not a burden either so don’t ask. Mom’s just having a hard time taking care of the three of us by herself. You’re a happy and easy-going girl with a love of books. Lots of people love you, Kristin.” Maya smiled at her.

Kristin sniffled and dried her eyes off with her sleeve. Maybe Maya was right. Maybe not, but either way, she decided to stop being sulky. She would try as hard as she could to make everyone’s life as easy as possible.

“Hey, stop wiping your face with your shirt. You’ll ruin it!” Maya said, with a playful wink.

Kristin smiled, suddenly grateful for her sister’s ridiculously happy personality. They walked over to their mom, Kristin clinging to Maya’s hand the whole time.

“Hi Mom,” Maya said, as she hung up the phone and looked over to them.

“Hey Maya, Kris,” their mom responded, looking at the two of them. Kristin was pleased that she had noticed.

“Mom, do you like my shoes?”

“Hmm, oh, yeah. Those are cute!” She obviously didn’t remember them, but that was okay. Kindergarten was a long time ago, since she was a grown-up sixth-grader now.

“I remember those shoes, you know,” Maya whispered to Kristin. “I was starting third grade and thought it was so unfair that Mom and Dad went out of their way to get you fancy new shoes when all I got was an ice cream cone when we were shopping. But then Mom explained how you were having a hard time, and that I should be supportive or whatever. I mostly made myself happy by telling myself that I was a big kid, and you were just a little kindergartener.”

Kristin giggled. She remembered shopping for the shoes almost as vividly as Maya’s combination of complaining that she didn’t get an extra pair of shoes and bragging about starting third grade and being an old pro at the whole “school” thing.

“Woah Kristin, I love your shoes,” Evan said, finally looking away from the notebook he was holding. There was an optical illusion on it, and he was pretty mesmerized by it.

“Thanks, Evan.”

A week later, Kristin opened the door of the car, looking up at the huge building in front of her. It said, “Seattle East Middle School” above the huge front doors. This is it, she thought, and she couldn’t help but look down at her beautiful new shoes. She remembered what her sister had told her; to think of good things about herself. Every time she did, it made her more confident. She had won the spelling bee last year. That was a good thing! Remembering the happiness of that night got rid of some of the anxious

butterflies in her stomach. No, not butterflies. Maybe they were moths. Butterflies usually are a positive thing, and moths are annoying. But she'd never heard anyone mention moths in their tummy. Hmmm.

"Bye Kris. Have a great first day," her mom said, interrupting her mental debate.

Kristin smiled. She was determined to make today better than great.

"Yeah, Kristin. Enjoy sixth grade," Evan said, not looking up, but mesmerized by his notebook once again.

Maya opened up the passenger window and said, "Remember your shoes, Kristy." It was a bizarre thing to say, but it made Kristin smile even bigger.

"Thanks," she said.

Maya smiled, too and said, "Bye Kristy. Today will be great. I can feel it."

Kristin smiled. "Bye Mom, bye Evan, bye Maya. Second grade will be epic, Evan. Enjoy high school, Maya." She waved as they closed the car doors and headed towards the entrance.

There were lots of people around her, luckily all looking equally as nervous as Kristin. Kristin smiled as she walked, and right before she walked through the doors, she could've sworn she heard a yell, "Nice shoes!"

Gilbert and Harold's Adventure

By Elliott Garry

“Hello, my name is Gilbert and yes I am a robot. Humans, this is what I need you to do; watch the video to the end it will help you survive.”

“Here we go everyone, liftoff whoo!”

“Oh Karen, stop eating all the robo food. Hey, I wish they also made robo cat food. Right Karen?”

“Oh yes, it’s unfair because Bobby is a dog.”

“Wait, Karen, look! It’s Cotyland.”

“A welcome sign,” said Bobby.

“Gilbert, I thought you said it was scary.”

“Yeah,” said Karen. “Cotton candy really.”

“Wait until you see the creatures,” said Gilbert.

“They are scary. I lost my invention there.”

“Ohh! So scary cotton candy,” said Karen and Bobby.

“Well, let’s go,” said Bobby. “Wait I need the camera controller.”

At Cotyland Gilbert talked about the climate and how things worked around there. They walked until they saw a big structure that appeared to be an abandoned castle made of cotton candy with cotton spiders all around.

“On second thought maybe they are scary,” said Bobby.

When they went inside, they walked through massive pillars and stopped when they saw the King of Cotyland, a massive cotton spider they fought bravely until Gilbert passed out. They ran to the ship to head to the robo hospital on earth.

After watching that, Harold took the camera and headed out to space. But when he got there, he realized he needed a weapon. So, he got a cotton candy stick and started fighting. Suddenly his friends came and defeated the monsters. Then they all connected with Gilbert.

When they got back to Earth everyone loved them and they all went on to travel to space many more times, but none were as exciting as the one in Cotyland.

Etapalli Going Eastward

By Madeline Heuss

Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith so you can finally feel fulfilled. In a world of negativity, the only thing stopping you from achieving your dream is the negativity holding your ankles like anchors. You can't keep continuously dragging them, so maybe you will follow my lead.

As I run, I can hear the alarms start to go off back in the facility. I push myself to run even faster and watch as the cliff comes into my view. I hear the doors start to open and doubt starts to cloud my judgement. What happens if I don't make it? I can't think about that now. I'm so close. I watch as the cliff is merely feet away and then jump, for the first time, I spread my wings. My beautiful tawny-brown wings.

As I hurdle off the cliff towards the great ocean below, they catch the wind and carry me up into the air. My long, dark brown hair carrying in the wind while I soar eastward. Away from the labs, the cells and needles. Away from all my problems and towards a new life. A life where I can have a job, friends, family and most importantly, freedom.

I hear the dozen people running out of the labs and screaming my name. "Etapalli! Get back here! You won't survive out there. We will find you!"

I don't listen as I let the sunbeams, streaming through the clouds, hit my pale skin and I rise even further into the wispy the clouds. Once I break through the clouds I laugh as I enjoy the feeling of my soaked clothes and wet hair. My white tank top is dripping, and my pale jean shorts have become blue. I embrace freedom for the first time and listen to the rising and falling of my wings. This is the first time I have ever been able to use them, other than wreaking havoc in the labs.

Admiring my new-found strength, I move even further away. I know I have to be quick. I can't risk being caught and my small portions won't hold me over for too long. I sink through the clouds after about half an hour, knowing that I need to find a place to get food. I smile as I get soaked again and scour the land below, searching for a town to stop at.

Not even five minutes later I spot a small town and hope that they have some means of getting food. I let myself free fall for a while, embracing the feeling, and drop down far enough away as to not be seen by anyone. With that, I set off towards the town.

Years of being experimented on and tricked have taught me to be wary of people. You never truly know who someone is, at least until they poke you with a needle without your consent. Then you know exactly who they are.

As I approach the town, I finger the wallet I had taken from one of the lab workers. My bird genetics are lifesaving sometimes. I walk on a sidewalk towards a gas station, relieved to see only one person inside. I walk through the door with the bell chiming and walk over to a section with sandwiches. I grab three of them and walk over to grab a bottle of water. I walk up to the cash register and pick up some protein bars and 5-hour Energy drinks for the journey.

I notice that the teenage boy has a backpack sitting behind him while he rings up my items. I look in the wallet I had taken and see an unexpected amount of money. I could probably buy a cruise ticket with that amount of money, which I soon notice is true. There is a little note tucked into the wallet with notes on a cruise to Hawaii and a flight to Japan. It looks like that lab worker was planning to go on a nice vacation.

I look at the boy and ask, "How much would it take for you to give me that backpack?"

The boy looked confused and looked behind him. He shrugged and said, “Forty dollars so I can get a new one.”

I nod and grab out \$45, wanting to give him an extra \$5 for his troubles. I quickly grab some more food and drinks for the flight. I wait there while he checks out my items. Feeling a little self-conscious by all the food I’m buying I chew on my lip and look at him. He doesn’t seem to mind at all though.

Once I have paid for the food, I fill my new bag with everything and, saying thank you, walk out of the gas station. The boy nods in acknowledgement and then sits on a chair while scrolling through his phone. I exit the gas station and find a table by a tree next to the library. I sit down and eat my sandwiches contemplating my next move. I think back to the notes in the worker’s wallet. After finishing my food and feeling energized again, I quickly walk into the library.

The librarian looks up in surprise and I walk up to her.

“Are there any computers I could use quickly?”

“Of course there are,” she said cheerfully. “Just to the right!”

Smiling, I thank her, and walk over to the computers. Someone up above must be looking out for me because the last user forgot to sign out. I do a quick search and capture the route into my head. I log out of the computer and wave to the librarian as I leave. I’m assuming she doesn’t see many people working in this town as she waves back sadly. I take a drink of water, place it back into my bag and start running with a mission. I spread my wings, making sure no one is looking, and take off into the air.

I’m not sure if I was made to be a savior or a weapon. If I’m meant to be an angel or a devil, but I’m sure of one thing. I’m not what they make me. Everything I do is my choice. As I head to my new life, I feel content knowing that every decision will be my own.

I rise into the air with a determined look and speed forward on my adventure. I’m not sure what challenges I will face on the way but at the moment, look out Japan because here I come.

Taco Argument

By Marco Jakovich

It started one day when I was with my sister, Sasha, and we got into an argument. I wanted to order a soft shell taco at Taco John's, and Sasha wanted a hard shell taco. We only had enough money to get one.

I said to Sasha that we should get a soft shell taco because it tastes better. She said the opposite. Then she said that a hard shell taco does not spill as much meat, cheese and lettuce. I told her that was not correct because you can wrap up a soft shell taco. I said that a soft shell is not stiff like a hard shell so it should be better. She did not agree with me. Then she lied and said that she was allergic to flour, but she knew that I knew that she was not allergic to anything.

Then I suggested we have a Taco Bravo because it has both hard shell and soft shell. Sasha said no. I asked her why not? She said no again. I asked if she wanted anything other than a hard shell taco. She said nothing. I thought that she was stubborn.

I gave up and said, "Fine, we can have a hard shell taco but with no mild sauce."

She said no again because she had a fixed mindset. I really hated mild sauce, and she loved it.

I said, "How about I choose what to get and next time you choose."

She said she wanted to choose first. She also said to hurry up because she was starving. I said ok.

I ordered a hard shell taco with mild sauce. We waited and waited for what seemed like hours. It was so long that I thought I saw the sun go down and come back up again. Finally, we got our food. She wanted to have the first bite. I let her. We ate a really good taco other than the shell and the sauce.

To conclude, it is okay to lose arguments sometimes!

Kyla's Sweet Sixteen

By Kaedyn Judd

Kyla Smith lives in Mesa, Arizona and goes to Westwood High School. She has two siblings named Bryce and Presley. Bryce is in college, Kyla is in tenth grade and Presley is in second grade. They have three dogs and a cat. They grew up about 20 minutes outside of Mesa. They live in a white condominium and have an inground pool in their backyard.

One day, on February 20, Kyla was at school when she got called down to the office. The lady at the front desk told Kyla that her mother wanted to talk to her. Kyla was nervous because she didn't know what her mom was going to say. She picked up the phone and her mom, Angie, told her she had good news for her. Her younger sister had stayed home today since it was her birthday. She could hear Presley jumping up and down excitedly in the back. Her mom said that her friend, Maddy Peterson, would be coming to visit her in the month of April. Kyla didn't believe her mom when she told her this. She hadn't seen Maddy for almost a year now. Maddy was her best friend from elementary school.

They met in first grade, in Mrs. Langer's class. They became best friends after that and got very close with each other. After the summer of seventh grade, Maddy had found out that she would be moving to Florida. Maddy was excited for this new opportunity but was also devastated to leave her best friend. Maddy's family was moving since her dad accepted a new job in Tampa, Florida. They wouldn't be able to see each other every day now. This made both girls sad since they grew up together and have lots of good memories with each other.

Knowing that Maddy would be moving, they both wanted to make the time they had together fun. Maddy would be leaving on September 7 so they had a little bit less than a month to hangout before they wouldn't be able to see each other for a while. The girls didn't want to think about it too much, but rather go and have a blast the last couple weeks of summer.

Kyla and Maddy went on many adventures during the last couple of weeks before Maddy would take off and start a new beginning. They did everything they possibly could think of doing. They went surfing, water skiing, swimming, to an outdoor movie, had picnics, hiked, went to fairs and enjoyed the rides together, had campfires, and checked many more activities off their bucket list.

Their time together was coming to an end and they knew they would have to say their goodbyes in a couple days. They had many sleepovers over that summer and loved making brownies in the kitchen at 2 a.m.

The day had come when Maddy was all packed up and ready to move to Florida. They both had spent the morning together and talked about all the fun times they had together since they became best friends. They both wrote each other a handwritten note and printed off lots of pictures to look back at. After hugging each other goodbye and Maddy's family driving off, Kyla was sad to see her best friend leaving her. She had to make new friends now.

Over the next couple of years, it wasn't easy at first, but Kyla was able to develop new friendships and bond with other people. She still texted Maddy everyday asking her how life was in Florida and how her day went. Now that Angie had told Kyla she would be seeing Maddy again, she was so excited! This was an opportunity to reunite with her best friend and see her again.

Maddy also has a sister in second grade just like Presley, so their family booked a flight to Missouri to come visit for a couple weeks since Presley's and Kyla's birthdays are close together. After Kyla heard

this news, she was so happy. For the rest of the school day she was very antsy and couldn't wait to see Maddy soon.

Weeks passed, and the Peterson family would be arriving in three days. Kyla and Presley, and the rest of their family, were very excited for them to come back to their hometown Mesa, Arizona.

Slowly time had passed, and it was now April 4. The Petersons would be arriving anytime now. Their car pulled up the driveway and Kyla and Presley ran out the door to meet them. They hugged each other and jumped up and down. The families sat down inside and talked for a while. They ordered pizza for supper from their favorite pizza place in town.

After supper, the Petersons settled into the Smith's house where they would be staying for the next two weeks. Maddy was hanging out in Kyla's room and getting all caught up on what she had missed when she was gone. They talked for a while until it came to mind that they wanted to have a party for Kyla since her birthday was coming up soon. Kyla's birthday was on April 15 and she would be turning 16. Maddy thought it would be a fun idea to have a party to celebrate the special occasion. The girls didn't know exactly what they wanted to do.

Whether it was going to a movie, bowling, swimming or to an escape room. They were considering each option and trying to decide which one to choose. After talking about it for a while, Maddy and Kyla decided on having a pool party at the Smith's house. Kyla's birthday was on a Thursday, so they planned on having it Friday, April 16. The girls had a lot of work to do to figure out all the details and it was getting late, so they went to bed and were going to talk about it in the morning.

The next morning the girls had waffles and fruit for breakfast. Now they had to get to work and start planning the rest of the party. They had told both their parents last night about the idea to make sure they would be okay with it and they all agreed. The girls decided that they would invite around 15 to 20 people since they wanted it to be a special time. The guests would arrive at 2:30 p.m. on Friday afternoon. They would decorate the pool area and have a snow cone bar where the guests would be able to make their very own snow cones. They would have a DJ to play awesome music and make the party that much better. Lots of snacks and drinks would be included and they would have tacos for supper. After swimming for a while, they could roast s'mores over the campfire and chat. Kyla and Maddy were thrilled for this occasion.

They invited their friends and told them all about the party. Kyla and Maddy went shopping to buy all the decorations and everything they needed to make this party one to remember. It was the night before Kyla's birthday, and everything was prepared for the party the next day. Everybody was very excited and could not wait for the day to arrive.

The next day the girls woke up bright and early to get the last details put in place. They enjoyed bacon and eggs made by Kyla's dad who was a very good cook and always made delicious food. The girls got dressed and ready for the day. The time was coming closer until the guests arrived. The snacks and drinks were set out. The pool was opened and ready to go in. Streamers and banners were hung up.

The guests started to arrive as it was around 2:30 p.m. Everybody arrived with smiles on their faces and wished Kyla a happy birthday as they walked in the door. When everybody was there, they headed out to the back. Music was playing loudly, the sun was beating down on the sparkling pool water, and everybody was laughing and having a good time on this perfect summer day.

After swimming for a long time, Kyla opened her presents. She was grateful for everything she received. It was now time to eat ice cream cake which is everybody's favorite part. The cake had writing on it in blue frosting "Happy 16th Birthday Kyla!" The cake was detailed with floral designs. After eating cake, they played outdoor games until it grew dark.

Then they all sat by the campfire and roasted some marshmallows to make s'mores. People were starting to leave, and the party was coming to an end. She thanked everyone for coming to celebrate with her. Kyla had the best birthday ever and she would always remember this day.

Willow

By Randi Krueger

Hi, my name is Willow and I have a brother named Ray and a sister named Sky. I am the oldest child in our family. We have our parents and our grandma. My grandpa sadly passed away four years ago. The crazy thing about our family is that my mother is human and my father is a merman, so they got three half-blood mermaids when they decided to have children. As a half-blood mermaid I can dry off and get legs. When I get in water again, my legs form into a tail and I can breathe underwater. It's the same for my siblings, except our hair and tail colors are different. My hair is about to my knees and is a turquoise color, while both Ray and Sky have dark blue hair.

Our lives are run by a strange government that sorts us by the color of our hair. Blondes are wealthy, proper, wear fancy dresses, hold fans and are always so polite. The blondes' jobs are making clothes and providing delectable foods. If they are talented enough, they can make jewelry or art.

The people with brown hair aren't as fancy and are definitely not as polite as the blondes, at least that's what I have heard. They believe in this weird thing that includes women doing all the housework, while the men's jobs are building furniture and farming. The farming includes meat and all crops imaginable. This is only possible since the government can regulate the weather.

Then there are the black haired; they are the best at fighting! I read a book about their techniques. They were so amazing! Anyway, they make the best weapons, like swords, knives, bows and lots more! I would love to learn how to shoot a bow and arrow, it looks like so much fun!

Then there are all the half-bloods. We all live together to protect each other. It's not allowed but if the other territories could get to us we would all be kidnapped and sold. Merpeople's jobs are to find seafood and seashells, the centaurs write books about astrology and planets, the satyrs can usually get rare plants for medicines, and there is this half-blood bull man that makes a lot of bakery stuff. I don't have the specifics on what the others do. All these things get transported on a boat tram, so each territory gets its own amount of goods from the others, but they too have to provide their share.

I forgot to mention that each tram stop has lots of guards to make sure that the goods arrive safely but most importantly that no one gets on or off the tram. The tram is the only way to get to the other territories and it is strictly forbidden that anyone rides it. This life is really unfair, for example if a child in the blonde community ends up with brown hair, well, that's the end for them, same if you get caught riding the tram or in someone else's territory. I guess if they wanted to spare you they could, but if the government found out you would all be killed.

You're probably wondering why I didn't mention the red-haired territory, well it doesn't exist anymore, they rebelled against the government. The government killed lots of them, though some got away and now call themselves pirates. I've heard that they live in boats and rescue the children that are supposed to be killed. I've never met one but I think I'd like to one day.

"Willow! We have to go," said Ray, he was being impatient about us having to look for shells.

"OK!" I say jumping in the water, it only took a few seconds for my shiny turquoise tail to form.

Ray was already ahead of me. When I caught up he said, "I'll race you."

Before I could say anything, he took off! All I could see was his shiny green tail ahead of me. Then I saw this weird looking wall type thing that seemed to move. I didn't know what that was, but Ray didn't even seem to see it?

"Stop, Ray! Slow down!" I yelled but it was too late. He had already run into it.

“Will, help me! I’m stuck!” he yelled.

As I was swimming towards the wall it started moving upward and I panicked. I swam as fast as I could, but it wouldn’t stop. By the time I got there the net was out of the water. “I can’t just leave him!” I thought. “I need to get him out!” So, I jumped. I jumped so high that I could finally grab onto the thing holding Ray.

It all happened so fast. One second I was hanging on for dear life, the next I was thrown onto a hard floor tangled in this weird substance. All I could see was people trying to get to us until I heard someone say, “Back up, what did you catch?”

They all listened, they all backed off and I saw the one that spoke. He was really tall and looked powerful, he had on a large trench coat and had several swords on his belt, but the thing that stood out most was his red hair.

“You’re a pirate,” I said nervously, but did not even realize I had spoken.

“Yes, I am, and you two must be half-bloods,” he said. “Great, that will be about 4 million in my pocket once I sell you.”

“You can’t sell us!” I yell while standing up. I look to Ray who is still trying to comprehend what’s happening.

“Why not? I need the money and you two seem like the perfect opportunity to get it,” he says as he grabs my wrist and drags me to the bottom of the floating device. He throws me into a box shaped thing with bars, locks the door and leaves.

A few seconds later my brother gets dragged down here as well except that he is put in a farther away box. As I contemplate what to do, someone comes down and slides food under the door. It’s been a while since I have had food, so without thinking I eat all of it.

After a few minutes I start to feel dizzy. I have never felt this way, it feels like the world is spinning. Then just darkness. I wake up to a bird screaming in my ear. “Shoo!” The bird flew away.

Then I check my surroundings, it looks like I am chained to a low bridge in my human form. Ray is next to me. I reach out and shake him. “Hey Ray, get up we have to go now, we have to try to get out of here. Buddy, get up, the pirates are gone we have to go now!”

After a few seconds he stirs. “Will, we really need to get out of here,” he says sleepily before he realizes that I actually mean it. “But how are we supposed to do that?” he asks.

“Well, first we need to get out of these chains,” I say while messing with them. “They didn’t put them on too tight so I can just slip them off,” I say as I slip the chains off my wrists.

Ray grumps, “Well lucky for you, my hands are bigger!”

I remember reading about how black-haired picked locks to get into things. After I read that I was so obsessed that I bought my own lock picking set and carry it with me all the time. “I remember!” I say as I fish the kit out of my pocket.

“That sure would have been useful in that floaty thing,” Ray said annoyed as I picked at his lock.

“One done finally,” I say as I move to the other lock. As I am working, I feel Ray flinch.

“I’m not really the type to rush a person, but that red head is rowing his way over here!”

As I pick up the pace on the lock I hear the tram. “Ray, listen to me. When I am done with this lock you and I are going to jump on the tram.”

“What?” he yells.

“You have to listen to me, it’s our only way out. We can hide on until we get to our territory. I know it’s dangerous but it’s the only way!”

“OK, but pick up the pace, the pirate can now see that you’ve escaped and is now running towards us!” Right as he says this, the lock bursts and the tram goes by.

“Jump!” I yell as we both jump onto the tram. It was moving faster than expected. We find a place to hide and figure the next stop is ours. As we are just sitting there Ray starts going through things.

“Hey look, it’s one of my favorite fruits!” he yells as he holds up a watermelon. “I’m going to take it home so I can eat it!” he says excitedly.

“As long as you’re going to carry it, there’s no way you can make me lug a whole watermelon home,” I say as we see our stop. We had both made a plan to run to the woods and meet up there, that way hopefully the guards wouldn’t see us.

As soon as the tram stopped, we bolted. I don’t know about Ray, but I accidentally ran through the guards open break room. It turns out we were wrong, this was the brown-haired territory, and when I tell you I ran through that break room and made eye contact with one of the workers I knew that this was not going to be easy. I was running and they were chasing.

I met up with Ray in the woods, he was still holding that watermelon, “We need to get out here,” I said out of breath. “And you should ditch the watermelon.”

“No way. I haven’t eaten one of these in months. If I go, the watermelon will too!” he said stubbornly.

“There they are. Get them!” I hear someone yell.

Ray and I both decide to dash into the community hall. It was packed in there, and our bright-colored hair isn’t easy to hide. The surprising part was when everyone decided to scream and run out room. I don’t know where they went but that was a dead giveaway. Ray and I started running in the halls that seemed like a maze that lasted forever, and soon they caught up to us. We started running faster but Ray was falling behind but he was still carrying that dumb watermelon.

“Drop the watermelon!” I yell at him so he would hopefully not get caught.

“No!” he yells, “I want to eat it.” He tries to pick up his pace but ends up falling behind again.

“Drop the dumb melon. If we get back home, I swear I will get you another!” I yell, hopefully convincing him that he does not need the watermelon.

“Fine,” he yells back tossing the watermelon behind him, slipping up a few guys.

He caught up to me laughing, but that stopped as soon as we realized that we were cornered. These people were not as rough as the pirates, they wouldn’t pull your hair or randomly poke you, and they wouldn’t threaten you if you sat on the floor and refused to move. They would just pick you up and carry you to their so-called “interrogation room.”

When we were put in there we just told them the story acting sorry the whole time in hopes that they wouldn’t kill us. They all seemed really nice and even though they put us in a so called “cell,” they would always talk to us about being a half-blood. They told us that they agreed with the pirates about killing people and how unfair this whole world was. I actually made a really good friend there. He is a carpenter, and usually comes to talk to us every day after work. His name was Adam.

One early morning I woke up to Adam shaking me. Ray was already awake. “Hurry and get up we have to go, I think I found a safe way out of here, it’s a long walk but then you can go home.”

“Ok,” I mumble as I slowly get up. As we walked, I asked about how we were going to get home.

“When I was little, I ran far away from my house after I found out about what the government was doing. I stumbled across the ocean that seems to attach to all the other territories. So, I built a boat, and I think we can get you two home with it,” he replied.

“You know we could have just swum, right?” I asked. I didn’t even know about the ocean connecting all the territories, but I guess it makes sense.

When we got to the boat, Adam got in but Ray and I just stood there staring at it.

“So, the floaty thing is called a boat.” Ray said and then got in.

I on the other hand, wanted to swim so I just dove into the water. It felt so free, I had missed swimming. When I came to the surface Adam looked surprised. My ears changed and I now have a tail but I thought he knew about that. “I’m just going to swim along,” I said. “Which way are we going?”

Adam could only point north. A few hours later we finally made it.

“Are you going to be ok by yourself?” I asked Adam.

“Yes, it’s not that far back, plus I like the ocean,” he said and then he turned serious. “I will see you again, right?”

“I don’t know. Hey, maybe we could send letters to each other on the tram!” I replied.

“Good idea, let’s do that. I better get going before it gets dark, but it was nice meeting you and I know we will see each other again. We will have to send letters to the other groups about taking over the government but when we do I’ll see you two again! Well, bye,” he said and we waved.

As soon as we got home, we told our parents everything. Then I had to tell them about the watermelon and how we now have to buy one for Ray.

Four years later we had taken over the government and everything was fair, and it all started by getting kidnapped by pirates.

A Hidden Talent

By Grace LaFrance

as Longhorns to victory. He was a designated hitter and could hit the ball harder than anyone. He never wanted to retire from baseball. However, when he was diagnosed with stage 1 pancreatic cancer, he had no choice. He spent the last five years of his life spending as much time with family as possible.

Now, as Dominic Chapman threw the baseball to his best friend, Kyle Anderson, he remembered his Uncle Henry. He loved baseball because of his uncle who taught him everything he knew. Uncle Henry would always say, “Dominic, one day you’re going to be better than me.” Dominic used to always wish that he could be as good as his Uncle Henry. Now, however, he wanted nothing to do with being a baseball star. He felt that he was replacing his uncle in a way. His Uncle Henry was a baseball star, and Dominic has the skills to become one. They even look alike. They both have the same dark hair and blue eyes. Everyone tells Dominic that he is just a smaller version of his uncle.

“Good throw,” said Kyle. He caught the ball and threw it back to Dominic.

Kyle Anderson was Dominic’s best friend. They did almost everything together, including baseball. They are both 14 years old and play for their school’s eighth-grade baseball team. Kyle was easily their best pitcher. Their coach, Coach Murry, wanted Kyle to play with their ninth-grade team. Kyle, however, requested to stay on the eighth-grade team. He said that he liked playing with the eighth graders better. However, Dominic knew that he only stayed on the eighth-grade team because of him.

During practices, Dominic does not try to do anything better than a seventh-grade level. His family does not know this. They just think that Coach Murry does not realize talent when he sees it. Kyle is the only person who knows that Dominic does not use his full potential at practice. Since Dominic does not do well during practice, he does not get played during games. Only occasionally does Dominic get in a game to play. He wants his Uncle Henry to always be remembered as the baseball star of the family. Dominic does not want to take that title away from him.

Kyle always tells Dominic that he could be playing with the tenth graders if he showed Coach Murry his skills. Dominic always replied, “Henry was playing with the ninth graders in eighth grade, not the tenth graders.” The conversation always ended there.

It was the eighth-grade baseball team’s second practice of the baseball season. Everyone was trying their hardest to impress Coach Murry. Everyone except Dominic.

“Dominic, go hit,” said Coach Murry. “Kyle, you pitch.” Dominic and Kyle headed onto the field.

“You can hit this ball,” Kyle whispered to Dominic. “You can show them all what you’ve kept hidden. I’m not saying you have to hit it but think about it.”

Dominic already knew what he was going to do. He was going to miss it. But he knew that Kyle was only trying to help. “I’ll think about it,” replied Dominic.

Dominic walked over to home plate and positioned himself while Kyle walked over to the pitcher’s mound. Kyle pitched the ball. As the ball was coming toward him, Dominic knew that he could make a good play on this ball. His instincts told him to hit it, but he purposely missed it. Dominic looked over at Coach Murry, trying to look apologetic. Coach Murry ran a hand through his hair.

“Kyle, nice pitch,” he said. “Alright everyone, bring it here.” Everyone huddled around Coach Murry as he ended practice.

As everyone started walking towards the dugouts to grab their water bottles, Coach Murry motioned for Dominic to stay behind. “Dominic,” he said. “A word.”

Dominic looked at his coach. “Yes Coach,” said Dominic.

“You confuse me,” said Coach Murry. “I see so much potential in you, but you fail to present it.”

Dominic looked at the ground. He knew that Coach Murry had been thinking about this for a long time. It was only a matter of time before he said something. “I know,” replied Dominic. “My uncle was good and I’m not.”

Coach Murry took a deep breath. “That’s not what I meant,” said Coach Murry. “You go up to bat when you already know that you’re going to miss. I just don’t think that you’re trying as hard as you can.”

Dominic was afraid he would say this. “I’ll try harder,” replied Dominic.

Coach Murry smiled at him.

Dominic looked at the ball in Kyle’s hand. It was a nice day for practice, and everyone was working hard. Even Dominic was working harder than he normally did. He decided that to keep his act going, he would have to hit the ball at least once. Today, he planned to hit the ball, but he would hit it foul. As he stood at home plate, he looked over his shoulder at Coach Murry. His coach nodded at him, and he looked back at Kyle.

Kyle pitched the ball. Dominic instinctively swung the bat. He was halfway through the swing when he realized that he was supposed to hit it foul. He purposely turned his shoulders at the last second. The ball flew almost 430 feet, then landed out. Kyle looked at Dominic, shocked. Dominic had not told him that he was planning to hit it.

Coach Murry rushed over to Dominic. “Dominic, that was amazing,” he started. “If you hit that straight, it would’ve been a home run!”

Dominic looked at his shoes. He was not planning to hit it that far. “It was a lucky hit,” he replied.

Coach Murry looked completely surprised. “Dominic, that was a great hit,” said Coach Murry. Kyle and the rest of the team ran over. Kyle still looked shocked. The rest of the team was ecstatic. “Okay everyone, let’s end practice,” said Coach Murry. “Everyone knows that we have a tournament in Houston this weekend. We have one more practice tomorrow, and then it’s time to show everyone what we’ve got.”

As Kyle and Dominic walked home that day, Dominic explained how Coach Murry had told him to try harder. “So that’s why you hit the ball,” confirmed Kyle.

Dominic nodded. “I wasn’t planning to hit it that far,” Dominic said.

Kyle kicked a rock in front of him. “It was a fastball,” Kyle said.

Dominic looked at Kyle. “What?”

Kyle readjusted his backpack on his shoulders. “I pitched you a fastball,” Kyle said. “Most people aren’t able to hit my fastballs, but you can. You can make some of the best plays with them. That says something about you.”

Dominic thought about this. Maybe Kyle was right. Maybe he could be playing with the tenth graders if he showed Coach Murry his skills. They started walking up Kyle’s long driveway. “I’ll race you up the rest of the driveway,” Dominic said with a smile.

“You’re on,” replied Kyle. Both boys started sprinting up the driveway.

There were three days until the tournament in Houston. Coach Murry just ended their last practice of the week. “Dominic,” Coach Murry said.

Dominic walked over to Coach Murry.

“Talk to me,” said Coach Murry. “You didn’t hit a single ball today. Don’t tell me that you were trying your hardest. I know you weren’t. When you were batting, it was almost like you were avoiding the bait. When you hit the ball yesterday, your form was perfect up until you turned your shoulders. You were using your instincts up until the last second. You didn’t use your instincts once today. You were avoiding them. Why?”

Dominic was utterly surprised. He had never been confronted like this before. He did not know what to say.

“Henry was one of the best baseball players I’ve ever seen,” Coach Murry said.

Dominic was confused. Why would Coach Murry mention his uncle? “Fan of his?” asked Dominic.

Coach Murry pulled out a photo from his pocket. He handed it to Dominic. It was a team photo of the Texas Longhorns the day that Henry Chapman led them to victory. There were six players standing in the back, and five players kneeling in the front. “I played with him,” replied Coach Murry. “That’s him there.” He pointed to a player in the front row. He looked very much like Dominic and had a big smile on his face. “That’s me,” he pointed out a tall, scrawny player in the back.

“I can tell that you have instinct,” Coach Murry continued. “I’ve been a coach for a long time. I can tell by that one hit you had yesterday, that you have potential. It’s up to you to use it.”

Dominic looked at his coach. He did not know what else to say. Coach Murry looked over his shoulder. Kyle was standing on the sidewalk. He was waiting for Dominic to walk home with him and looked bored out of his mind.

“I think Kyle needs some company,” said Coach Murry. “I want you to keep that.” He pointed at the picture.

“Thank you,” said Dominic.

It was the day of the tournament. They had won against every team they played so far. Dominic was in the dugout; he had not played once today. His McMullen Bears uniform was still clean and fresh. The championship game would be the McMullen Bears against the Denton Eagles.

“Alright, this is just another game,” Coach Murry told his players. “If you play like you have been, you’ll do just fine. We’re hitting first, so Adam, you’ll be starting us off.”

Adam stepped out onto the field. Dominic could see that Adam was nervous. The first ball was pitched. Adam swung. He missed by an inch. That was one of the fastest pitches Dominic had ever seen. It was even comparable to Kyle’s.

“It’s okay, Adam,” said Coach Murry. “You got this one. Just focus on the ball.” Adam nodded.

The second ball was pitched. Adam swung, but the ball didn’t hit the bat. The ball made contact with his hand. Adam yelped and dropped the bat. He knelt down and held his injured hand. Coach Murry hurried onto the field.

“Do you think he’ll be okay,” Kyle asked Dominic. Judging by the speed of the ball, Dominic did not think so.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

Coach Murry walked into the dugout. He faced his team. “Adam’s not going to be able to play,” he told them.

“Who’s going to bat then,” they all asked at the same time.

Coach Murry looked around the room. Dominic knew he was the only option he had. “Dominic will,” he said.

Dominic walked out of the dugout. He would be first up to bat. Coach Murry grabbed his arm as he walked by. “Dominic,” he said. “I should’ve told you this earlier, but you need to know this. Henry always talked about you. He had so much faith in you. He always hoped that you would follow in his footsteps.”

Dominic looked at his coach. “They’ll forget about him,” he said. “He won’t be remembered as the baseball star of the family anymore. I will.”

His coach looked at him. “You could never replace your uncle,” Coach Murry said. “No one could do that. Your uncle would’ve wanted you to do your best. He’d be proud that he had a chance to teach you before he passed. You’ll be carrying on his legacy. His memory will be carried with you. Whenever someone thinks of you, they’ll think of him.”

Dominic thought of this as he walked to home plate. He positioned himself, ready to bat. He realized that Coach Murry was right. He would be letting his uncle down if he threw this game. He needed to make his uncle proud and do his best. The pitch was thrown. Dominic swung with all his might, focusing on the ball.

Smack! The ball flew through the air. It landed 460 feet from Dominic. It was a home run! The crowd jumped and screamed. The score was one to nothing.

As the game proceeded, the score stayed close. Dominic felt that his uncle was with him throughout the whole game. Every time he batted, he remembered how much faith his uncle had in him. The final score was eight to seven. The McMullen Bears had won. By the end of the game, Dominic had four home runs with seven runs batted in. He had shown his talent.

The Rider

By Grace MacPherson

The day was sunny and warm, the perfect wedding day, Ivanna thought. Standing next to Lotar, she looked around at the assembly of people waiting to watch their marriage. She stole a glance at Lotar, the man she was about to marry. He seemed calm, his face relaxed and his tunic immaculate. Ivanna nervously brushed the skirt of her dress. She wished she were as calm, as certain as he.

She sighed slightly as the rector began the opening words of the wedding ceremony. Two years ago, she never would have expected she would one day be standing here with Lotar. She had told Tastron she would marry him, but he had died in the war – the war that had been raging in their country for nearly a thousand years. It had taken a long time to heal from that, but she had finally accepted that Tastron wasn't coming back. Through patience and much effort, Lotar had finally won her affection. She didn't love him the way she had loved Tastron, but maybe it would be enough.

Her eyes unfocused as she looked at the hills that lay blurry on the horizon. Was it just her imagination, or was there a small black spot there, a rider swiftly approaching the village? She squinted. Yes, something was there. But she wasn't sure what.

Ivanna shook her head to clear it as Lotar reached out and took her hands. His hands were very nice hands she thought, not sweaty or clammy or dry like some people's. She gathered the courage to look up, to look into his eyes. They were happy and hopeful, and his lips lifted into a smile. She gave him a small smile in return.

The rector, a slight, elderly man with a wispy beard, cleared his throat. "Ivanna Kira Everin, do –" "I'm sorry." It took Ivanna a moment to realize the words had come from her own mouth. When this realization had come, she took a deep breath and repeated them. "I'm sorry. I can't."

The rector blinked at her. He had performed more than a few wedding ceremonies, but this had never happened before. "You can't what?"

Ivanna turned to Lotar, and her next sentence came out painfully. "I'm sorry. I can't marry you."

Wordlessly, Lotar dropped her hands. He stared at her for several moments, and when he spoke, it was so softly that at first she wasn't quite sure if she hadn't imagined it. "Why not?"

"I..." Ivanna swallowed hard, forcing down the burning in her throat. "I don't love you. I'm sorry, Lotar. I wish I could love you... but I can't. Not the way I should. I thought maybe I would be able to, but I'm not. I don't... I don't want to sacrifice your happiness for mine. But, neither of us will be happy in a marriage without love."

Lotar stared at his hands. "It won't be a marriage without love," he whispered. "I love you, Ivanna."

"I know," she said foolishly. "I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to do this. But I can't marry you. I would only break your heart because I gave my heart to Tastron, and I don't know how to take it back."

A few yards behind the back row of the audience, a man slid off his horse. Ivanna didn't notice him, but if she had, she would have known he was the rider that she had seen in the hills. With mingled interest and bewilderment, he surveyed the scene in front of him.

Ivanna continued, "I know he's dead now. And I know I'm released from my betrothal to him because of that. But I love him still, and I can't promise to love you forever as long as I do."

"I understand," Lotar said quietly. His voice and face were very calm. "I release you from our engagement."

Even though he was outwardly calm, he was aching inside. He had always known that she did not

love him. But she tolerated him, and he thought that sometimes she enjoyed his company. And he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loved her and would do anything to make her love him. But now... she stood here in front of their entire community, telling him she did not love him, had never loved him, never would love him. And he loved her enough to be willing to let her go.

Ivanna choked up a little and had to pause for a moment before she could speak again. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't do this if there were another way. And..." She buried her face in her hands, unable to go on.

"Ivanna."

Her head jerked up from her hands. She would have known that voice anywhere. "Tastron?"

"Yes." Walking towards her, between the crowded rows of chairs, was the rider she had seen before the wedding had begun. Before she had not recognized him, but now she did. It was Tastron. He reached her, and she fell into his arms, holding him tightly. His embrace was the opposite, very gentle and very tender.

And then, suddenly, everything around them burst into motion. The people were all talking, some excited, most simply shocked. Lotar's father was on his feet, shouting and waving his arm in Ivanna's direction. Tastron's mother was sobbing, pressing her way through the crowd to her son's side. Ivanna's father, Teise was standing on his chair, holding up his arms for silence. Slowly, the crowd quieted, and Teise spoke in a loud, clear voice.

"I think what we ought to do first of all is thank God that Tastron has returned to us alive. My daughter was not the only one in this village who loved him deeply. He has many friends among us, as well as his family, and he was like a son to me."

The assembly murmured in agreement, and they clasped hands with the people around them, bowing their heads as Teise again spoke, his voice still clear, but now hushed and reverent.

"Father, we thank You that You have taken the sting out of death for all who call upon Your name. And we thank You for today restoring to us Tastron Herave. We know Your ways are beyond our understanding, and when we thought You had called him to You, we believed You had a reason. But we thank You that You have allowed him to stay with us a little longer. Grant that he may use his life wisely and follow Your will. Amen."

Amen. The word echoed through the crowd, and Ivanna whispered it with an overflowing heart and overflowing eyes. Tastron squeezed her hand tightly, and she blinked away her tears and lifted her head.

Teise cleared his throat. "And now we are left with the question of what to do next." He glanced at Tastron.

Tastron inclined his head questioningly in return. "I still have your permission to..."

Teise nodded. "Of course."

Tastron turned to Ivanna. "Do you... do still want to marry me?"

Her lips twisted into a wry smile. "Did you not hear a word of what I said a few minutes ago?"

"I'll confess, I was so glad to see you again that I missed much of what you were saying."

The glimmer in his eyes told her he was only teasing, and she laughed. "Do you need me to say it again?"

"It's hard to pass up a second confession of undying love. But unfortunately, it would mean delaying the wedding."

Her hand went to her mouth as a delighted laugh escaped her lips. "You mean... right now?"

"I don't see why not." Tastron glanced at the rector. "If you don't mind?"

The rector shook his head with evident exasperation at the antics of young people these days. "If you want to get married, you'll have to do it now. I'm not interrupting my afternoon nap for another wedding ceremony."

Tastron shrugged at Ivanna. "Looks like it's now or never."

Her face broke into a smile. "Then let's do it now." She squeezed his hands as the rector once again

began the opening words of the wedding ceremony. And she knew that this time, there would be no interruptions.

The Lost Children

By Joy MacPherson

There were four kids playing tag in their front yard. The youngest was John, then Anna, then Peter, then Marie. They were all siblings. Anna was “it” and she chased Marie into the woods. The other kids followed. Soon, they looked around the forest and realized they were lost!

They felt worried and scared, but they were glad they had each other. They were getting hungry, and they didn’t know how to get home. Nobody had food, but Marie had a rope.

Peter said that they should look for berries in the bushes. Anna said that Peter had a good idea and started to hunt for berries. Soon, the siblings heard a whooshing noise. John thought the sound might be a creek and started running toward it.

The other kids followed him and discovered the noise was a waterfall. They were thirsty. Anna suggested they drink from the water, so they squatted down. The river was going by fast, and the sand under John’s feet slipped. He fell in and cried for help!

The water was washing him down-stream. Marie handed her rope to Peter quickly. Peter tossed the rope to his brother, and John caught the rope, but his hands ached from holding it tight. Marie swam in and held his hand to get him out. Anna looked worried but cheered for joy as Marie rescued John. Marie and John climbed out of the water, dripping wet. Peter asked John if he was okay. John was breathing loudly, but said he was alright.

Just then, all of the children turned as they heard their parents calling as they looked for the children who had disappeared. Marie shouted back that they needed help! The parents heard her voice and came down to the river to help. John, Anna, Peter, and Marie raced toward their parents and hugged them. Then the kids told their parents about the adventure they had. They walked home slowly, holding hands, remembering to never again run into the woods without telling their parents.

Lily

By Ella J. Olson

Long ago, there was a human kingdom. Their pride and joy was their princess, Princess Lily. One day she vanished. The kingdom blamed her disappearance on their neighbors, the creatures of the forbidden forest. War broke out and both sides had hatred towards each other. But, one boy, one girl and one creature changed the realm's history...

There was a boy in a small human village on the border of the forest. He was only 12, but his imagination was big. His dirt brown hair matched his emerald-green eyes. Freckles were dotted along his face and his clothes were tattered but still good. His name was Paxton. He had read books on the forest and was enchanted by the forbidden plains that edged his little town.

One night, while his whole village slept, Paxton awoke to a strange noise that came from his living room. He thought it was just his parents having a conversation, but when there was a crash, Paxton's heart skipped a beat. He grabbed his stuffed bear and crept down the stairs. He watched in horror as a strange creature slashed its claws along his father's face. Paxton then realized what was happening, his village was being raided. He had heard of this happening to border towns, but he never thought it could happen to his home. Another creature was going through their belongings. The creatures had a wolf-like tail and ears.

Paxton ran up the stairs but tripped and let out a yelp. He continued up the stairs and hid in his closet. He heard his door creak open and saw claws scratched against the ground.

"I smell you little boy. You either come out of hiding or I'll find you myself," the creature said.

Paxton just scooted farther back until the doors of his closet were slashed into splinters. The creature grabbed him and began to drag him back downstairs. Paxton broke free and jumped out the nearest window. The glass shattered and Paxton met the dirt. He grabbed his arm, which had a large cut on it from the broken glass. He looked up and saw his entire village being torn apart. Paxton turned to his side and spotted the forest, an escape from this. He darted towards the woods and began to run farther and farther in. He ran until his legs ached and felt like jelly.

Paxton spotted a cave and laid down against the rocky wall. He took off his shirt and wrapped a strip of fabric around his bleeding arm. As the light from the moon shone above him and streamed into the cave, Paxton's eyes grew heavy, and he drifted off into a deep sleep.

The morning sun rose and warmed Paxton from the cold cave he slept in. He had only muddy pants and a thin tank top to keep him warm. As his eyes fluttered open, he saw the silhouette of a person. Their face was hidden by a hood and a scarf, only their light olive eyes were visible. The thing was, this person held a knife at Paxton's throat.

"Who are you and why are you in this forest?" they asked.

"M-my name is Paxton, and I came here as an escape from my village's raid!" Paxton blubbered nervously.

The person withdrew their knife and slid it in its holder in their belt. They stood up and peeked their head out of the cave, looking at the sky. "Ok kid, there is one thing you need to know about this place, never wander alone or you'll become dinner. I can get you to an elf village so you can have a safer place to stay," the person said. They helped Paxton up, took off their cloak, and wrapped it around Paxton. With their hand on their dagger, the person helped Paxton to the village.

“May I ask why you’re helping me? I’ve heard stories that the creatures of this forest were ruthless and merciless,” Paxton said.

“Well, I’m no creature, I wasn’t even born here,” the person said, pulling off their hood and revealing their face. Wheat brown hair fell out of the hood and rolled down to their hips and a scarred up yet beautiful girl now stood in front of Paxton. He saw something dangling from her neck, a small golden chain with the royal crest carved into its charm.

“You’re Princess Lily, but you were announced dead four years ago!” Paxton said.

“Dead? Is that what my parents thought had come of me? I’ve just been stuck here as a prisoner,” Lily said.

“Prisoner, but then where is your – ” Paxton began, but was cut off by a shake in the ground.

“Lily!” a loud voice bellowed.

From the trees out walked a boy, maybe 19, with pure white hair, deep black eyes and pale blue skin. Black feathered wings stuck out behind him and were open wide.

“Keeper...” Paxton mumbled.

Lily drew her knife and the two began bickering. The creature raised his hand and slapped Lily to the ground. His attention then darted to Paxton. Paxton was frozen with fear as the creature ran up to him, tackled him and glared at Paxton with a fire in his eyes. Just as the creature raised his claws, a girl appeared over them and kicked the creature off Paxton.

“Jinx, no. Leave the kid alone,” the girl said.

“Well, if you hadn’t run away Lily, I wouldn’t have to. Now, return home and I won’t hurt your new friend,” Jinx said.

Lily put away her knife and helped Paxton up.

“Um, aren’t you taking me to the elf village?” Paxton asked.

“Oh, little boy, you aren’t going to the elf village,” Jinx said in a creepy tone. Jinx dashed towards him, scooped Paxton out of Lily’s grasp, and flew away. They landed in a cave that was on the side of a mountain, high above the valley and Paxton was thrown into a cell. The bars rose and had officially locked him up. Jinx gave him a creepy glare and flew out of the cave.

A few moments later, he returned with Lily and threw her to the ground. “Watch the boy while I hunt. If you free him, you will be thrown into the cell with him,” Jinx said.

He opened his wings and flew off, leaving Lily and Paxton. Paxton could see through the bars that Lily’s hands were bleeding from being thrown against the rough stone floor. Lily grabbed a piece of bandage from a small chest and wrapped it around her hands.

“Lily, was it? What’s going to happen to me?” Paxton asked.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll just be a slave of Jinx with me. He may look like a threat, but he’s just a weakling who scares people into doing whatever his heart desires,” Lily said.

“So, how long have you been here? As a prisoner?” Paxton asked.

“Four years, maybe shortly after I disappeared. Jinx and I were friends, but something snapped in him one day and he enslaved me,” Lily said.

“Well, did you ever do anything harsh to him?” Paxton asked.

Lily’s eyes went blank, she had zoned out. She shook her head and grabbed a pillow and blanket. Lily slid them through the bars and gave Paxton a sympathetic smile.

“Paxton, there are some problems that just can’t be fixed. Make yourself a little bed and I’ll see you soon. I’m going to try to find something to break those bars,” Lily said.

She equipped herself with her knife and jumped out of the cave. Paxton could hear her yelling with joy as she slid down. He curled himself into a ball and sniffed. Soon enough, tears rolled down his cheeks and his body shook. What would become of me? A slave or that creature’s next meal? But Paxton then

remembered his mother and father, and if they were still alive, they'd most likely never see their son ever again.

Days turned to weeks and weeks stretched to months. Paxton was still a prisoner of Jinx, but his bond with Lily grew. While Jinx was away doing God knows what, he and Lily would have little chats and Lily would tell him about the creatures she'd encountered on her little runaway adventures. At night, when Jinx returned, he and Lily would argue, and Paxton would close his eyes and hold back tears as Lily hit the ground. He wanted to get out of there, to get Lily out of there. But why wouldn't Jinx let them leave? Two humans don't really serve a purpose to him since he is a strong creature. Paxton decided he'd find out. One night, while Lily and Jinx were doing their daily fight, Paxton yelled, "Why do you keep us here? We serve you no purpose, so why keep us as your prisoners?"

Jinx glared at him and began to walk towards him. Lily was staring at Paxton and shaking her head at him rapidly, but Paxton kept talking. "Answer me you beast!" he yelled.

That angered Jinx, a lot. He ripped the cell bars apart and grabbed Paxton up by his shirt collar. He dragged him over and dangled him over the exit of the cave. It was a lot farther drop than Paxton thought.

"I keep you here because no other creatures believe I'm threatening. I thought that keeping you and Lily as prisoners was enough, but maybe killing one of you will prove that I'm not weak," Jinx said with a craze in his eyes.

Paxton began to feel Jinx's grip loosen on his shirt and just like that, Paxton was falling to his death.

"No!" Lily yelled and jumped after him.

She caught up to him and wrapped her arms around him. Paxton could see Jinx at the top, frozen from his actions. He spread his wings and dove after Lily and Paxton. Just as they were about to hit the ground, Jinx caught them. Paxton had his eyes open wide after that near death experience. He looked over and saw Lily wiping blood from her mouth and Jinx regaining his balance. They had all been changed after that event. Paxton felt that regret wasn't the only thing that motivated Jinx into saving them. There was a sheer look of relief on Jinx's face when he saw that Lily was safe.

"Thanks," Lily muttered.

Jinx cleared his throat but didn't speak. Paxton knew it now, Jinx only saved them because Lily had jumped after him.

"Um, sorry kid. I just...got angry," Jinx said.

"It's ok," Paxton said.

Lily brushed herself off and glared at Jinx. "That was too far Jinx. Just get us back up to the cave and leave me alone for the night," Lily said. She walked away and started to the foot of the mountain.

Paxton looked at Jinx with a sincere smile. "I know why you saved us, thank you," Paxton said.

"I highly doubt that you know why I did what I did. Like I said, I just need you two alive so I can kill you later," Jinx said. He grabbed Paxton and Lily, flew them to the cave, and Lily stormed off to her room. Jinx sighed and returned to his. Oddly, he didn't put Paxton back in his cell, but wrapped a vine around his left ankle and just kept him locked to the ground. Paxton sighed and began to fall asleep.

As the days passed, Jinx began to lighten up a bit. Since their little incident, Lily had been colder towards Jinx and Jinx was nicer towards Paxton, since he did almost kill him. Paxton watched as Jinx would hopelessly look at Lily and sigh to himself sadly. Paxton could see that Jinx had feelings for Lily and was too afraid to show it. Paxton thought that he should know what happened between the two that made them this way. So one day, while Lily was out, Paxton looked at Jinx sitting on the edge of the cave and took a deep breath. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened between you two that made you like this?" Paxton asked.

"She did something to upset me and we fought. I said that she'd be dead without me, but she shot back that if she hadn't trapped the attackers, they'd both be dead. She said she saved me, and I never like when people helped me. I lost my temper and locked her away. For the past four years, we've hated

each other. But...I grew fond of Lily, in a love sort of way. There were times we got along, I'd hear her beautiful laugh and see her snowy white smile. Her light olive eyes are enchanting and sometimes I can't get her out of my head," Jinx explained, looking lovesick when talking about Lily.

"But then why don't you tell her?" Paxton asked.

"I don't think I could, and you've seen how I usually treat her. There is no way a kind-hearted beauty like her could love a short-tempered beast like me," Jinx said.

Paxton placed his hand on Jinx's back while he covered his face with his wings. Paxton then saw Lily climbing back up the mountain and an idea struck him. With a little nudge, Jinx tumbled down the side of the mountain and crashed into Lily. He caught her before she hit the ground and held her at his side. Paxton could see Jinx being flustered while Lily was just a little shook. But at that moment, they locked eyes and smiled at each other. Jinx was keeping them both afloat by flapping his wings. Then, both of them looked at Paxton with angry faces and Paxton knew he was in trouble. Jinx flew Lily into the cave and dropped her on top of Paxton. Lily pinned his arms above his head and Jinx held out his claws. Paxton closed his eyes in terror but soon opened them in surprise as Jinx tickled his stomach.

"Ok! Ok! I'm sorry!" Paxton choked out a laugh.

"Thanks for almost killing us, you dork!" Lily said with a mischievous smile.

Paxton was released and they all just laughed. Paxton saw that Jinx was smiling at Lily as she let out her laugh and he smiled sweetly. They may have their bad moments, but there is always love in their friendship.

Paxton didn't know what he was feeling, but he felt accomplished. Lily and Jinx began to get along and Paxton was happy because of that. He hadn't returned to his village, but Paxton had found a new family there. For the coming years, his family only grew. By the time he was 18, he had a little niece named Zira. In the end, all Jinx and Lily needed was a young boy's help and together they lived happily ever after.

Coasting

By Lauren Oswald

The world seemed to spin as the gray tracks bumped and squeaked against the chain. Was this it? Was this really what she paid for? Was it what she decided to give up fear for? The sounds of kids screaming, music blasting and cotton candy machines whirling were pounding in her head, trying to break into a normally quiet mind.

Why didn't she control herself? If the AcidBop3000 ticket booth hadn't been her first encounter when she walked into the park, then it would never have happened.

But it was too late. Sam Garcia had already made it into the bright blue and orange seats with the black belts in the fifth row to the highest point on the ride. She couldn't put her hands up and scream like the other twelve-year-olds in the front with big smiles and bulky braces. She had to sit there, desperately holding onto the sides of the cart, trying not to scream. And in just a few seconds, she would drop to her death from the highest point in the park. But she paused. Everything paused.

She caught a glimpse of it all. The sky. The shining sun. The fresh air. The other side. The end of the ride. She would be there. As soon as she committed to it.

It all seemed like a dream. But it was real life. She was living. Breathing. Thriving. And it was time to let go of the clinging fear of believing that life wasn't just a dream. It was reality. It was all rushing to her brain. One more small click of the track and she would be falling.

10. 9. 8. 7. 6. 5. 4. 3. 2. 1...

She fell forward in her seat and felt the fresh wind against her messy brown hair. A few people around her let out a scream, but she didn't. She lived. She survived it. She broke the fear that was constantly wrapping around her mind. And for some reason, she had never felt better.

It was almost like she plummeted from the sky. As her cart was dropping there was a small sensation of thrill that tumbled her body and shook her nerves awake. It was FUN. It didn't need to be frightening if she made herself think it was. She just needed to believe.

The ride continued on, adding a few more waves and turns, until the coaster slowed and the speakers sounded. She carefully got out of her seat and saw the familiar face of her friend waiting for the ride, and he waved at her.

"So, how was it?" he asked. "I heard this ride is quite intimidating. I never would've thought that you would do something like this. You're such a scaredy-cat."

She playfully shoved him aside as she stepped back so he could take her place on the ride. But before walking away, she stopped. "Hey, is there any more room in that seat? I think I want to go again."

He looked puzzled, but soon smiled and moved over. "Let's do this."

And for the first time, she smiled back.

The Hero

By Brynn Payne

Hi, my name is Vivian, I am a guide dog. Being a guide dog is a hard job. It is my second day as being a guide dog. Today my owner Jade is going to take me on a walk in the park!

In a couple hours I will be strutting around the park with my light purple vest on that says in cursive blue handwriting, "Hi, sorry you can't pet me at this time. I'm at work!" I love that vest! Jade gave the vest and harness to me yesterday.

Finally, it was time! Once we got outside, I saw my friend Pom-Pom the Chihuahua. She smiled. She's really old and always has dandelions stuck in her hair! I was so excited, but I did not run ahead, nor did I walk fast. I can't do that because I'm a guide dog!

But when we got to the park, there were a whole bunch of cats there! I signaled danger to Jade. She stopped. Her straight black hair billowed in the wind. I quickly turned, leading her to the other park. I swerved because big rocks were in the way. On the other side of the road, there was a construction site. The park was just around the corner. "Perfect," I thought. No other dogs or owners were there. I guided Jade over to a bench and I jumped on with her. I think after the belly rubs, I fell asleep.

Suddenly, Kiyana, a golden-brown husky guide dog, bounded over to me and woke my peaceful slumber. She was nervous, I could tell by the look in her eyes. She said, "My owner thought I was guiding him with my harness. He took off my harness when he sat on a bench. Now he is in the construction site! You have a lot more training than me. Please help me!"

My eyes were as big as golf balls. My mind said, "You will lose your job if you help her, don't!" But I knew what I was going to do.

Kiyana easily took my harness off. I ran as fast as I could to the construction site. Once I got there, I saw Kiyana's owner. He was definitely in danger! I ran over with my harness secured inside my mouth. Panting, I got there. I nudged the harness into his hand and slipped it on. Thankfully, we made it out. The bad news was he had a horrible gash on his knee. I pawed at his pocket and quickly his phone fell out. I dialed 9-1-1. Before you could say bacon bits, the ambulance arrived.

I was worried Jade had gotten lost, but she was smart and stayed on the bench when she didn't feel my harness. Guess what? I got a medal and I didn't lose my job. Kiyana's owner was ok, so I guess we all had a happy ending!

Cliff's Edge

By Leila Pratt and Delaney Rosera

Crash! The waves hit against the steep drop of the ravine. I fell onto my back. My arm was jugged at an odd angle, clearly broken. I didn't scream for help. I laid on the ground staring at the stars, my eyes beginning to glaze over. I heard rustling behind me. I tilted my head slightly to the left and saw two pairs of eyes staring at me, one pair green and one pair brown. My mom and the family dog, Axel. My mom came to me up to me but didn't move me. She just stared at my broken arm.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She told me we needed to get to a hospital because my arm was broken. I knew that, but I just managed a nod. She started walking, hauling me with her, but Axel wouldn't move. He started barking at what appeared to be thin air.

"Come on, you mutt!" Mom screamed. I winced.

Mom turned back around and froze. I craned my neck to see what she was looking at. Then I wished I hadn't. A big, black and bulky bear with twigs sticking out of its fur. And there was more. A cub. It wasn't just any old black bear; it was a mama bear.

I started screaming and punching the air with my good arm.

"What in the world are you doing? You're going to get us killed!" My mom screeched.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the two bears turn to go back to the woods. My mom noticed and immediately called the ambulance to pick us up.

A moment later, the mama bear was back, followed by two other giant bears. Axel lunged for them, buying my mom and me the time we needed so we could run. I held on with my good arm as tight as I could.

I only looked back once and wished I hadn't. My beautiful Axel lay numb, legs sprawled out at abnormal angles around him. I knew he was dead, but I didn't say anything. I turned my head to look forward; this might have been the worst mistake of my life. A branch poked me right in the eye. I felt blood dripping down my face. I started to scream, but my mom just kept running. I believe she thought I just caught on to my dog's death. She finally looked at me, her eyes growing wide, then dropped me. I landed with a thud. When I needed her most, she had fainted.

I needed to make it to the ambulance by myself. If only I knew where the ambulance was! I could barely see and had no phone to call for help. Sure enough, my mom did. I took the phone out of her coat pocket and sent my dad the phone's location. Just a few minutes later I saw my dad and the paramedics with a big stretcher.

The paramedics picked me up swiftly, set me on the stretcher, and started to run in the direction of the ambulance. When we finally got in and started driving away, the paramedics hooked me up to machines and inspected my eye. One paramedic explained to my father that I had a broken arm and had gone blind in one eye.

My heart stopped.

"Are you positive she is blind?" my father asked them. The paramedics explained to him my injury but I couldn't hear. My mind was flooding with memories from that night. I jerked up.

"What about Mom?" I started to scream, looking around and not seeing her through my blurred vision. The paramedics calmed me down and explained that she hit her head on a rock when she fainted. They had to send another ambulance for her.

That was the day that my life changed forever. I now have a service dog named Axel that guides me through my blindness. My mom is doing just fine.
And I've never gone back to that cliff.

The Bench Under the Apple Tree

By Leah Proehl

An apple tree lay on the edge of a town in a small clearing of trees, hunched over a small bench. The branches curled and basked in the sunlight, laden with blossoming fruit in the cool summer breeze. The wind whispered its way around the tree, rustling the fruits, still so small and bitter, still holding the potential to grow.

The bench that lay beneath was rough with wear, from a time when people bothered to come out and just breath the fresh air wafting through from the countryside. Its wood was chipped and alive with growth, its iron stripped of paint. On the bench sat a petite girl, giggling and talking to the tree in the evening. She beamed as she told stories about her day.

“And then I went to the farmers market! I got lemon poppy seed bread!” Her pigtailed bounced as she lifted a small loaf of speckled bread as if to show it to the tree. “I would give you a piece but can trees even eat? You don’t even have a mouth.” She looked up at the tree, her eyebrows knitted together inquisitively. Her eyes sparkled as she set the small loaf back down next to her, not bothered by the lack of response. “You’re my friend. The other kids say I can’t be friends with trees, but I am.”

She sat there in silence for a moment, swinging her legs that weren’t yet long enough to touch the ground. “Do you like my shoes? They’re old, but they still light up!” She slid off the bench, stomping her feet on the ground in demonstration. “My dad doesn’t like them. He says they’re boy shoes because they’re blue. Do you think I can wear boy shoes?” She looked down at the dirty shoes, stomping them again and smiling as the shoes lit up with a weak flashing light.

The rays of the sunset bathed the clearing in golden light, and she glanced up from the ground. Her curfew was coming up very soon. “Do you think my mom and dad are home yet?” She didn’t look at the tree. “I don’t think so. They leave me alone a lot.”

Grabbing the bread off the bench, she walked to where her frilly pink bike had been thrown down. Looking back at the apple tree as she steadied herself on her bike. “I have to go home! But I’ll be back tomorrow!” She smiled and kicked off back into the town.

Within the next week, a name was carved into the tree by hands sticky with lemon poppy seed. Set in the middle of the trunk, messily carved with a dull blade lay the name “June,” carved with the desire to prove that a tree could be her friend.

The tree went many years without seeing the girl again. Seasons passed and the clearing was abandoned by everyone except the occasional squirrel wanting to snatch a bite of apple. Fall came and the bitterness of incoming cold sat in the air, encouraging the apples to grow fat and round, bursting with sweetness. However, the ripening apples were very susceptible to bruising and often went to rot without ever being touched.

The sound of falling footsteps echoed throughout the clearing and a boy stumbled into the clearing. His eyes were swollen with tears and his breathing was uneven, whether it was from running or from crying was unclear. He leaned against a nearby tree while he caught his breath. The rough bark scratched against the baggy hoodie that protected him from the sting of the fall air. Why did he have to be like this? He vigorously rubbed his eyes in an attempt to calm down, but his heart still raced and the lump in his throat refused to go away.

School bells chimed in the distance. He was supposed to be there. He didn’t want to be there. All he would find at the school were teachers droning on about their class rules in stuffy classrooms, filled to

the brim with unforgiving students. Talking to his classmates was a game of Russian roulette, littered with white lies like, “No offense” and “Not to be rude or anything.” He couldn’t stand it. It was all too much, and maybe that’s how he ended up here.

With a sigh the boy trudged over to the bench. The tree towered over him, enveloping him in a hug. He flopped down on the bench, the old wood sagging beneath the sudden contact. What God had looked down on him and chosen for him to be like this? Why was he the one who his peers avoided? He wanted to be normal. He wanted a friend, any kind of friend. He wanted to know who he was, and he wanted to know what he was. But he doubted those answers would find him for a long, long time, if ever.

Eyes glassy with exhaustion, not from lack of sleep, but from lack of closure, he stared up at the name etched into the tree. For the first time in quite a while, he felt a calmness sweep over him. For the first time in many years, the old apple tree had some company.

A few days later, the apple tree bore another name. Set underneath June’s messy scribble, in much neater letters, was the name “Jordan.” June wasn’t alone anymore, and now Jordan had a friend.

Yet again the tree went a few years without seeing anyone. Not the girl, not the boy, not anyone. Yet again, seasons passed and the apples still grew and the tree was still forgotten. Now it was winter. The bitter winds of fall transformed into raging winter storms, flurries of snowflakes whipping through the air, knocking the rotting apples down from where they hung from the old apple tree. The leaves were gone, now falling to waste and dirt beneath the snow. The sky was cloudy that day, with the sun breaking through the clouds ever so often. There were children playing outside with rosy, frostbitten cheeks and numb fingers, building snowmen. A person walked into the clearing. A person with a black coat, and bags under their eyes.

Her eyes were a basement cellar, dark and devoid of life, but full of clutter, swimming with thoughts. He slouched as if each thought was a rock on their back, and her feet were dragging because the weight was too heavy. Trudging through the snow, he made their way to the bench. Eyes low, and mood even lower.

Who was she? Were they even human anymore? Why was he like this? If this world was built upon the foundations of self-assured kingdoms who burned in the night, then who was she to try and fight the nature of it?

Looking at the names etched on the tree like broken promises, the person smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. They gently lowered herself onto the bench. It was cold, and the bench was frozen, and he didn’t want to risk breaking it. The brittle winter breeze whispered a hello, nipping at their nose. The world was frozen in time. All that existed anymore was the apple tree, the bench and the stranger. That’s what she was. He was a stranger. An imposter.

As they sat there, she saw what he was to the world. A lone traveler at a crossroad, not belonging to any of the destinations that the roads lead to, but not wanting to turn back. They were the kind of stranger that could sit on the side of the road begging for food, and nobody would spare her a second glance. Everyone in the world was so occupied with the next best thing that nobody took time to stop and spare him a second glance.

They could fade away here. She could cease to exist, a lone traveler frozen in time under a forgotten apple tree, a lone stranger under the names of people long forgotten. If he was to freeze here, with the rest of nature, would anyone notice? In a world so big and busy, does one person, who has no clue what they are supposed to be, even matter? Does she even matter?

The apple tree, usually so warm and inviting, towered over him, reminding them of how small she was. Cold and lifeless, the rotten apples that stubbornly clung to its branches became grenades of truth. Threatening to drop and prove to him of how much of a difference that they don’t make, proving how everything that lives with purpose falls to rot.

If everything that lives with purpose falls to rot, then what about her? What about him who lives without purpose, or direction, or even a grasp on what they wanted in life?

But did anyone really have purpose?

The names in the tree burned a hole into the strangers' conscience. Why carve your name in a place that no one will ever see? Surely not to be remembered. They asked herself, what was the purpose of those carvings? Of those people?

The stranger abruptly got up. If he had no purpose, then they could at least lack purpose along with the useless carvings on the tree. June, and Jordan, met another person that day, but not someone with a name. Quickly carved into the trunk in the desperation of frozen fingers, now sat the simple phrase "Who am I?"

The sun slipped through the branches of the apple tree, and as the light hit the snow and lit up the now empty clearing with a blinding glow. The icy bench sparkled, and time resumed as children continued to make the smiling snowmen.

One year passed. One more lonely year for the apple tree and its collection of wandering souls. It was now spring. The tree blossomed with fragrant pink blossoms, beautiful and fresh. The bench thawed and moss started growing along it again. The rotting apples turned to dirt to support new life. The world was thawing, and life was returning.

Jamie walked into the clearing, the soggy ground squishing beneath their boots. They did not walk to the bench. They stopped in the middle of the clearing and stared at the names carved into the apple tree. Jamie smiled softly at each one. They smiled at June's messy scribble. They used to be June, but June was not them. June was the little girl who couldn't grasp why she couldn't wear what society dubbed as "boy shoes." They smiled at Jordan's name. They used to be Jordan, but Jordan was also not them. Jordan was the boy who was taunted by society for being in the wrong body. Jamie even smiled at the question at the bottom. "Who am I?" They used to be a stranger, but the stranger was not Jamie. The stranger was confused and unsure. The stranger failed to realize that she could make his own purpose.

So, what was the difference? The difference is that Jamie knew who they were. It took a while. It took a long while, but they figured it out eventually.

Jamie approached the tree and added their name at the bottom. The final addition. And as they stood back to admire everything they used to be, Jamie felt pride for making it this far. They whispered a thank you. And with that, they turned around and left. Jamie never looked back. All that remained was an old rotting bench, and an apple tree with a story etched out in its bark.

Wendy's Blossoming and Blooming Confidence Feat

By Cami Schuh

Note: This is a mini sequel to The Land of Stories series by Chris Colfer. Background: In the book, the Book Huggers are a group of four girls who are always very suspicious of the Bailey twins. At the end of the last book, they find out that the twins have been living in a fairy tale fantasy world called The Land of Stories. Wendy is one of the Book Huggers but is very shy and seldom says anything at all.

The Book Huggers were not going to stop now. They had just learned what really happened with the Bailey twins. They were overjoyed but then the Bailey twins brainwashed them so nobody knew about the Land of Stories. They all went home like nothing happened not remembering anything. But the Book Huggers had an advantage over the rest of the world. They had documented everything weird that had happened with Alex and Connor. They were having a meeting one day and saw countless books. All of it came back to them. They were determined to actually explore the fairy tale world.

“Okay, everyone. How are we ever going to get there? The bridge is closed!” Cindy said.

“Well, the only one who can get into the portal is Alex! How about we go visit her!” Mindy said.

They later arrived at the Bailey’s house. Charlotte answered the door. She really liked the Book Huggers so convincing her was not that hard. They did not even need to make a single threat! They begged, and she told them how to get in. They followed her instructions which was drinking a special potion, and they magically appeared inside.

They had arrived in The Land of Stories! It was beautiful! Even though they had arrived Wendy was feeling very glum. The other girls decided to ignore it because they knew she would not talk back to them. They sat just outside the Southern Kingdom underneath a large tree. They needed to discuss what they were going to do in this world. They all very easily agreed they would like to learn magic and follow that path. But nobody realized that they had not asked Wendy. Wendy sighed with sadness.

For years they learned magic. They were all pretty equal in power. But Wendy did have a weakness. Her weakness was that she had to use her wand or anything else but did not recite spells. This did put her behind the group, but she always managed to catch up. She did not talk because she chose not to speak and is too shy.

Every day they would face new challenges such as not knowing how to make someone happy. They would solve problems and spread happiness. Problems even as simple as someone’s plants dying. They became very well-known and nothing was in private anymore. Even with all these exciting and happy changes they made to the world, Wendy was still depressed. Mindy, Cindy, and Lindy had all tried to talk to her about it, but she would not respond, as usual.

One time they came across Alex and Connor. At first the Book Huggers started to stutter and make excuses about why they were there. Alex started to ask a question, but Connor interrupted with a sigh and rode off. He definitely knew there was no secret anymore even though he had brainwashed them. They both knew they could not stop the Book Huggers once they had their mind made up. The Book Huggers had crept on Alex and Connor for years, determined to find out about their lives. It was no surprise that they had figured out another way to get to this world.

One day all the girls were together as a group sitting outside the fairy palace. Mindy, Cindy and Lindy were all chatting as usual. They were talking about what they wanted to learn in their magic studies.

“Next, I want to learn about transforming my image into different objects,” Mindy said.

“That is not cool at all! I want to learn how to read minds!” Cindy said.

“No way! This is the 21st century for goodness sakes!” Lindy said.

All the disagreements led them to go back to their separate rooms.

The next day Mindy, Cindy and Lindy apologized to each other. Wendy just sat there.

“I heard about a magic class that we could take together, how about we do that?” Lindy said.

“Sure!” Cindy said.

“Okay, I will enroll all of us!” Mindy agreed.

Wendy could not take it any longer. “I have had enough! I don’t want to do magic anymore! All of you are being selfish doing only what you want! No one ever asked me what I wanted to do!” Wendy yelled.

All three girls sat there completely astonished. They continued to sit in stunned silence as Wendy stomped off. The girls sat there for two hours unable to wrap their head around what had just happened!

Meanwhile Wendy was in her dorm planning her next steps. She thought back to a time about two years ago. She had just gone into her mother’s work office. Her workers asked how she was doing, and Wendy naturally did not say anything. When they got home, Wendy got a talking to. Her mother scolded her and told her she needed to make a change, but Wendy was not ready. At this moment Wendy decided that now she was ready. She was not going to be this way anymore. She obviously made it clear that she did not want to do this anymore, so what was she going to do next?

It took her a couple weeks to find herself. She had always followed along with the other girls. She had never thought about what she was passionate about. She did not talk to the other girls during these few weeks. Finally, she knew what she was made to do.

She approached them one day while they were eating lunch. She sat down beside them. All four of the girls were very uncomfortable. They could all feel the tension. Wendy could taste the bitterness of her breakfast from earlier. It turned sour in her stomach. “I am not going to be practicing magic anymore. I have decided what I am going to do with my life. I am going to start a club for all the little girls in the kingdoms here. I am going to help them to grow into confident women!” Wendy said.

“Oh okay. See you later then,” Lindy said.

Wendy was upset by their reaction, but it couldn’t stop her from what she was about to achieve! The first thing she had to do was go and talk to Alex. Wendy had seen her at school and knew she had made big changes in her life. She was an unappreciated smarty transformed into a self-assured figure. She also was the fairy godmother and could make anything happen if she believed in it. So, Wendy went over to the fairy palace to talk to her. She went inside and greeted her. Alex too, was astonished. She didn’t know her very well, but she did know that Wendy never talked.

“Umm. Hello? What are you doing here?” Alex said.

“Could I speak to you in private please?” Wendy said and gestured to all the fairies listening around her. Alex agreed and took her to a cozy little room on the top floor of the palace.

Wendy told her of her plans to help all the little girls. At first Alex was confused because she thought Wendy was following the course of magic. Wendy explained that it was the other Book Huggers’ ideas.

“That is a wonderful idea! Think of all the girls you will be helping! I definitely could have benefited from that as a child!” Alex exclaimed. So, the women set up a wonderful plan.

The next day Wendy traveled to the Northern Kingdom with Alex. Wendy was a little nervous but standing next to Alex really helped her confidence. They explained what Wendy wanted to start. They told them it is going to be a program for girls who are shy. Wendy is going to help them and turn them into confident people. They then go to the other kingdoms and do the same thing. Alex was really helpful. People sure do listen when the fairy godmother supports what you’re doing. In every kingdom they tell the people that the first session will be at the fairy palace on a certain day and if they want to come and check it out, they can come.

On the day of the first session, Wendy started to second guess herself. She worried no one will like her and no one will come. All this changes when she sees all the people flooding in the gates to the palace, with smiling faces.

The first session went great. To start off she talked about what her life started like. She showed what a different person she was. Lots of people showed up to every session. Mothers with their young daughters. Everyone could see the changes in the little girls there already. Even the mother's mindset had changed.

Even after all she had done, Wendy was still upset over her broken relationship with the other Book Huggers. She needed to talk to them. She approached them one day and to talk to them. She could feel her heart beating like a drum inside of her. "I am really sorry everyone. I was upset for not being asked what I wanted to do, and I should have talked instead of yelling at you all," Wendy said.

"We knew you would not respond, so we got used to making the decisions. We are sorry too," Mindy explained.

"I know, I guess at the time I was expecting for you to ask me a yes or no question. But that was silly. It was my fault for building up the no talking reputation," Wendy said. "Are we good, then?"

"Yes, we always need to support each other. Your program is remarkable, and we are proud of what you have become," Cindy said. They all gave each other a hug.

Since that was settled, Wendy continued with her sessions. She did it for the rest of her life, encouraging all those people. It made her feel great and it also made everyone else feel great.

On her 96th birthday she looked out of the window of her bedroom. She saw the clouds dancing around the sky and the flowers smiling back at her. She was really old now and was unable to hold sessions anymore. She had married a man at the age of 22 and throughout her life had six children, all of which were girls.

Her children were now hosting the sessions, all working together. She thought about all the amazing queens that were now running the world who had once come to her sessions all those years ago.

Her Story

By Randi Selbrade

Yurri, no one knows much about her, not even her parents. She mainly kept to herself. When her parents had talked to her about their opinions, she had just agreed with them. Especially when she was a young child. Then again, she didn't really know anything about the world until she was 13. Living in a small town in Canada didn't really let her know much either. Everyone was kind of the same, which bothered her, mainly because she didn't feel like she was like them.

Throughout her life she had always felt like she was lying about something, but she couldn't figure out what it was exactly. Attempting to ignore that feeling was hard, and it was always on her mind no matter what. She wouldn't discover what it was until she hit the age of 17. During those years in between so much had happened. Her parents had split, but not because of the ordinary argument or just not liking each other anymore. Her mother had been arrested. This had been so hard for her because she had no idea how to feel about it. Should she be concerned? Glad perhaps? Angry? Sad? She probably would never figure it out.

Her dad didn't like her mother though, to the point where he didn't want to give Yurri the chance to visit once she was in the halfway house. He had made up the excuse that they were moving to America to be closer to family. But most of the family resided in Canada, not in Minnesota. But she of course couldn't fight, but she struggled inside her head.

Due to the move, she was forced away from friends, probably the most important people to her. They were her motivation for things and they had always been there. Now they are more than likely never going to see each other again.

When they first reached their new home, they were given a warm welcome. This consisted of a visit from a man, woman and a girl who looked to be around 14, same age as Yurri. Immediately this gave Yurri some hope, the girl looked and felt friendly. Her smile was comforting and didn't make her feel nervous. She didn't even stumble with her thoughts about the girl, which was an immediate sign of trust. Someone who had made her finally smile after the days they had spent travelling, but her dad didn't like them.

He was always a loner, so of course this visit ended rather quickly. All that was really allowed to happen was a "welcome to the neighborhood" and then a farewell almost as soon as it had been said. As the door was closing, the girl's smile had disappeared, possibly never to be seen again. Cartland, Yurri's dad, had passed by her going to his room, probably to unpack more. While passing by he had told his daughter to go outside and find something to do. She knew he had said that to make her leave the house and leave him alone, but she didn't mind.

Throwing on a pair of Converse and one of her flannels, she had gone outside like she was told. As soon as the outside was presented and the door had closed she just stood there on the sidewalk. No idea at all of what to do or where to go. She had her money inside, but it wouldn't matter, it was Canadian currency. She didn't know anyone, except the girl, but she didn't know her name or where she lived. Not to mention wouldn't it be a bit creepy if she went from door to door looking for her? She thought, Maybe I should walk around and see what there is to do. No, the neighbors would see that this isn't someone they know and report her to the cops or something. It didn't help that she was just standing there, it has to look rather odd and suspicious. Sitting would be a good thing to do but where? If she sat on the side

of the road someone might think she's lost or homeless and take her somewhere. Maybe someone would

—
 “Are you okay?”

Hearing a voice Yurri 's quickly snapped her head up and saw the same girl that was at her door who was now standing to her left. The girl smiled gently, glad that she had been heard and caught her attention, but she tried to hold back a giggle from the rather flustered expression she had. Yurri couldn't find anything to say, even though she was comfortable around the girl. She just kind of stared, and just kept on without realizing, still kind of stuck in her thoughts.

“You moved in just today, correct?” the girl had questioned, getting Yurri back to the real world, and only got a nod in response.

“Well, I'm glad! I don't really have anyone to hang with around here but that can change now. Oh, name's Vere by the way.”

“Yurri,” she responded. Why was she struggling so much to talk to her? Yurri thought to herself that the girl can't be the only one making most of the conversation, I have to say something. “So, what exactly is there to do around here?” the brunette asked, causing the girl with round glasses that brought out her brown eyes to smile more.

“Honestly, not much. But I was just going to the gas station to get a slushie. You can come if you want,” she took a quick pause and let out an airy laugh, “and don't worry, I'm not going to do anything.”

After being reassured by the girl's words, Yurri nodded and walked alongside her new potential friend. And as it turns out, if it hadn't been for the sudden craving for a slushie they would have never gotten to where they are today. Which was an interesting sight but not too uncommon for them. A 17-year-old with dark skin standing in front of a mirror, just now getting ready at 2 a.m. while her pale, shorter friend was leaning over the edge of the bathtub working on her, hopefully soon to be, blue hair while blaring some Paramore.

Vere's parents were currently out of town for the week on a vacation, so she had of course used that to her advantage. “Are you sure I'm doing this right?” the girl wearing one of her friend's old shirts that could be stained with hair dye yelled in order to be heard over the music and the water.

“Yes, yes you are. So do not ask me to read the instructions to you for the fifth time,” retorted the one at the mirror, now cutting her hair to make sure it doesn't cover her eyebrows too much. Ever since she cut it short, she would never go back to having long hair, it was just so much easier to deal with. It does give her a reason to laugh at her friend when she wakes up with it completely tangled. The water was soon turned off, but she was still hunched over the bathtub, leaving only the music to be heard and the sound of scissors being placed on the side of the sink. “You forgot what to do next didn't you?”

“Yeah... “

“You have done this a thousand times, yet you still always forget,” the half pink, half black-haired girl said before walking to get a towel and quickly tossing it onto her friends back. “Just dry your hair and that's pretty much it.” She had told her before grabbing her phone, going through it while waiting for her dark eyed friend.

Yurri had just wrapped her hair in the towel, showing that she was ready to leave the cramped room by grabbing the speaker which had been turned down a significant amount.

Both leaving, they walked towards the room two doors down. Once the door had been opened it presented a messily decorated room that still managed to look good. Flopping down on Vere's bed could be one of Yurri's favorite things to do. Vere stayed by the door next to her dresser to look for something, which was soon in her hands. Turning towards Yurri with her hands behind her back she slowly walked towards her. “I really do not like it whenever you have your hands behind your back, it often means you're going to throw something at me,” she said somewhat jokingly, getting a smirk out of her friend.

“Happy birthday, child.” Yurri had a plushie of a frog in front of her.

She had completely forgotten that she was turning 17. Of course, this had left her flustered that she had forgotten, but her friend remembered, and had even gotten her a gift. Soon in a rather normal state for her she stared, stuck in her thoughts.

“So, are you going to take it, or do I get to keep it? I mean I’m not complaining.”

“No, no, no, I want it!” Yurri jumped for her gift and hugged it, getting a content smile out of the one with slender fingers, often found tending to the various plants found in the room.

“Now that you have your gift, tell me,” taking a slight pause to sit next to her friend, “how do you want to spend the rest of tonight, well, morning?” She turned her head to see Yurri’s face.

“I really don’t know. I mean I didn’t even remember that it was my birthday.” The frog had still been interesting, forcing her gaze to stay on it.

“We could be like how they are in those movies.”

This caught Yurri’s attention.

“So let us start off with, how about truth or dare.”

“I thought you said that was stupid and would never play it.”

“Well, we are going to put a twist on it. Empty out your pockets.”

Cautiously Yurri had done as she was told. The only pockets that could be emptied were from her jeans and the denim jacket that she had thrown on the floor. Once emptied, there were many small things that most people wouldn’t have with them in a pile. This collection consisted of small oddly shaped sticks and stones, some buttons and old bottle caps, loose change, a lighter that was used for sage and candles, a needle and thread, and finally a twenty-sided dice that Yurri accidentally kept after playing D&D with some of her other friends, which is exactly what Vere wanted.

Grabbing the die, she held it up so they both could see it. “Odds will be dares and evens will be truths, but, if you get a one you get a dare that is much harder and rather risky. Get a twenty and you have to include more information chosen by the other person,” Vere stated mischievously. Obviously, she had something in mind, but of course saying no was too hard for Yurri so she had no choice but to agree.

“Okay, I’ll go first. Whatever I get, you decide on what I do or admit,” she said while leaning over her bed to grab a board for a hard surface to use. Placing the painted board that was gifted to her by Yurri on the bed, she rolled the die. Watching it roll for a good few seconds before stopping to land on a 10, resulting in a stare towards Yurri in wait for what she will say.

Thinking for a bit, she decided to be somewhat nice. “Now this is a truth so you have to be honest, did you watch the next episode the Skins without me?”

Guilt had been drawn onto Vere’s face very quickly, giving a slight nod. Vere was always good at over exaggerating her expressions.

Yurri knew it was a joke and laughed, “Well, you have to watch it again, because we can do that after this.”

Nodding, happy with that response, she passed the die to Yurri and they continued. This had gone on for a few more rounds, all consisting of either weird dares or questions coming with strange answers. But, during one of the turns, the soon-to-be blue haired girl had rolled a 20. It had been a good 15 minutes since they began, which was just enough time for Yurri to forget what the 20 meant. She soon got reminded by the question, “So, this hasn’t been exactly like how they act in movies, so let’s fix that. Tell me, do you like anyone?”

As cliché as it is, this caused Yurri to panic. She did but at the same time she didn’t. There are feelings for someone there, but she didn’t know who. She didn’t even an idea of what they look like or anything. But she couldn’t lie because that was against the rules and she had promised to never lie. But what does she say? “Yes, I do.”

“Ah, I thought so. But, you did roll a 20, which as you know means I get to choose what you tell me

more about. Who is it? I need a name, or multiple if there's more than one," Vere blurted, really wanting to know.

Hugging the frog closer to herself, Yurri had to think. She literally had no idea, and she was expected to say a name? But who could she say? Vere knows who she avoids, so she can't use any of them. She could say someone that goes to the art studio, but she doesn't take to anyone there, this basically means one of her friends, but who? She thinks to herself, just use anyone and hope that no matter what she doesn't say anything to them. "Asra," she had simply said, but the statement felt wrong, as if it was a lie. Can you lie unintentionally? Perhaps but it may never be proven true or false.

"Really? Asra? I never expected him to be your type." The slight silence following was rather awkward. "I guess I can see it, but give me the die, it's my turn."

The rest of the time was rather awkward and wasn't the same. The game soon became boring, and they moved onto watching the Skins episode, but Yurri couldn't focus on it. She really didn't have feelings for Asra like that, that felt weird to even think about. They were close friends, nothing more nothing less. The episode soon ended and by then it was around four in the morning, which made them extremely tired even after the countless energy drinks.

They prepared themselves for bed and laid down next to each other, face to face. A pillow had been placed between them, Yurri always moved in her sleep, often kicking the poor person sharing the bed with her.

"Night Yurri, and happy birthday," Vere said, smiling after finishing a yawn.

"Night Vere."

Vere's eyes soon disappeared from Yurri's gaze, who soon followed suit. Falling asleep was always hard, especially when someone has constant thoughts going through their head, which was causing Yurri to constantly change positions. Reaching and turning on her phone she saw that she had been doing this for nearly 20 minutes. Hearing the quiet breathing beside her, indicating that her friend was asleep, caused her to put her phone back down and turn to face her. She only starred, she looked so peaceful like that. She never got to see her without glasses that often, and she wished she could. Vere's lips were slightly parted, and some strands of hair were strewn across her face. Yurri was too busy thinking to realize that her face felt rather hot, she finally realized as to why she always felt like she was lying. The person who had caught her heart had been someone very important, her best friend, Vere.

The Joy of Reading

By Nityan Sharma

Today, I was awarded the prize for reading 100 books, the maximum number of books read by a student in my grade in a year. Everyone clapped for me. My parents were so proud of me.

I remembered the day of the Parent Teacher Conference a year back. As usual, I dreaded it! My teacher Mrs. Bella Scott again complained about my reading. My parents were concerned and really worried. I hated reading! I felt when there were movies made on almost all classics and also the audio books. Why sit in a corner and struggle to master reading?

My parents promised her that they would try their best. Well, they did try – chocolates, timeouts, movies and rewards. Nothing could make me read. I just felt it was a waste of time.

They enrolled me in extra special classes where I had to sit with the teacher for an hour thrice a week. Well, there was no way out!

I thought of a clever plan to escape this torture. I pretended that I could not see the words clearly. The teacher reported it to my parents. I was so happy that I would no longer be tortured. My parents felt really bad for scolding and punishing me. In fact, Mrs. Scott was also very sorry for me. I thought that was the end of reading classes.

But to my misfortune I was taken to Dr. James Coelriche, an eye doctor, for diagnosis. He was very friendly and jovial and asked me what the problem was. I promptly told him that I could not read the letters clearly. He told me funny things and soon I was laughing. He told me to look at the chart with pictures of different things. He winked at me and said if I could identify all, I would get a box of chocolates. In no time I identified all. I got the chocolates! I was asked to sit outside while he talked to my mother.

I was enjoying the heavenly treat when I saw my mother moving towards me like a hurricane. She snatched the packet and dragged me outside. She stood outside near the car and faced me. To my horror, I realized that in my greed I had given away my secret. I promised myself never to trust friendly and jovial doctors!

I waited for a tongue lash but nothing happened. I could see the different colors of the rainbow of anger on her face – pale yellow, orange, red and purple. I waited for the tornado to hit me! Nothing happened. I tried my last trick. I blurted out, “I have dyslexia!”

I am not going to listen to my elder brother ever! He fills my mind with such useless information!

She looked at me and for a moment I thought she was going to smash me into the sidewalk. But she just picked me up and buckled me into my seat and drove home. Aww! The wait was awful. I wished she would shout, scream and promise punishments. But nothing happened. Papa also didn't say anything! But I was grounded. No TV or audio books or game nights. My brothers teased me mercilessly about my eyesight and dyslexia!

After a week, there was a snowstorm alert. The school was suspended until further notice. The expected snowfall was 15–18 inches followed by a windchill that would drop the temperature to -47°F.

It was so boring. I could not go out, watch TV or listen to an audio book. My elder brother is a voracious reader; he had read about 500 books. He was lying on the couch, reading Asterix comics. I wondered how he could manage that. I imagined he must be a super reader hero. My younger brother was listening to Winnie the Pooh audio story book.

Suddenly, I heard a guffaw of laughter. My elder brother was rolling on the couch laughing

uncontrollably. I curiously asked him why he was laughing but tears were rolling down his cheeks and he fell on the floor, still laughing! I begged him to tell me, but he just kept on laughing! I begged and begged but he told me, “Read it yourself.”

In the evening he shared the incident with Papa and I saw both of them in splits. It seemed when Papa was young, he had also read that adventure and remembered falling from the sofa to the floor.

I begged Papa to tell me but he also said, “Read it yourself.”

Now I was curious and decided to learn reading only to know what was so funny in that Asterix comic book. I earnestly started reading and within a month I could read really well. Books became my magic carpet. I sailed with Sinbad the sailor, lived on the island with Robinson Crusoe, I was Jack in the Magic Tree House, I was Gulliver captured by the Lilliputians, and well, I was what I read – sometimes a pirate, a shark, a king, a ghost. The list is growing.

Finally, today after the function, my elder brother decided to share his Asterix treasure trove with me. I read the book hungrily and when I reached the particular section, I suddenly burst into peals of laughter. I slipped from the couch and rolled over the carpet trying to catch my breath between the peals of laughter. My elder brother and I were discussing it incoherently and laughing crazily.

My younger brother begged, “Hey, tell me also, I also want to laugh.”

Well, we told him, “READ IT YOURSELF!” and burst into laughter once again, tears rolling down our cheeks.

The Camp

By Rohan Sharma

I stood on top of Mount Everest with my fellow campers, Sherpa Namgyole from Nepal, William Anderson from USA and James Rhinestone from Germany. We looked at each other and hooted “Wooooowooooo,” the typical call of our club. We hoisted the flag of UNO along with the flags of our countries. We all belonged to The Global Club of Mountaineers sponsored by the United Nations Organization. All the fear, dread, frustration and nervousness were worth the great feeling of exuberance. Once we overcame the initial rush of adrenaline, we took photographs. We all rested briefly before going back to the last camp. At the camp we all talked, laughed and shared our feelings over the last 15 days of the tortuous trek.

I looked at the pictures I had snapped on the summit. Great moments, great memories! A memory of another camp flashed in my mind. Memories of my first camp I had attended. How I had resisted going to the National Middle School camp organized for middle school students. In fact, I resisted even joining this option. I wanted to join the NSS Club (National Social Service Club). The maximum physical activity was to teach village school children basic 3Rs (reading, writing and ‘rithmetic). The physical labor and interacting with other students, with a very high likelihood of getting bullied, was not my cup of tea! But my parents just ignored me. I tried to work on my mother, but this was one of the rarest occasions that she agreed with my dad. As usual, I resented it but gave in. This was the bane of my life! I feared conflict and avoided it at any cost. I rarely played any team sports. I enjoyed swimming and trekking, where I did what I wanted without the stress of competing with others. But this camp required a different mindset.

Apart from very basic military training the curriculum also included a bit of civil defense and firefighting. The objectives of the camp were to instill traits like leadership qualities, personality development, team spirit, a spirit of adventure, social and community service, inculcate a sense of discipline to make better citizens, and motivate youth to join defense services. Eminent personalities from various walks of life were invited to share their experiences and interact with cadets. Cadets interacted with local NGOs and carried out social service in and around the campsite.

Before leaving, I told my parents that I would never forgive them for heaping the torture on me. I stood bewildered, like a lost sheep, among the others in “stand at ease” position waiting for my group to be announced. I took solace in the fact that at least I would be among known faces from my school as my tent mates. To my horror, I realized that we were being grouped randomly. I felt nauseated and fear of unknown gripped me. My name was announced, and we all dispersed to collect our gear.

So, there I was, a lone trekker in the unknown wild! Four of us were supposed to share a tent. We collected our gear, eyeing each other suspiciously. We moved to the site allotted to us. We introduced ourselves and waited for the instructions. Captain Samuel Gomes and Major N were issuing instructions on how a tent should be erected. Ten minutes were given to us to break the task into manageable units and decide how to perform it to our maximum efficiency.

As usual, the bickering started about who was getting the easier tasks. Five minutes had passed, and no consensus could be reached. Time was ticking away like a time bomb and I, in sheer desperation, decided to take the toughest task as I hated to be singled out because of my group. Since I was the tallest, I could be the anchor! What a group I had inherited – Cody was fat, Sameer was short but stout for his age and Tluanga was too thin with a narrow frame. While erecting the tent we cribbed and blamed each

other for any lapse. To my misfortune the officers must have been watching us with a hawk's eye! I was appointed as the leader of my group. I would be responsible for the performance of my group.

The rest of the day passed while performing mind-numbing tasks. Before we dispersed for the night, an announcement was made that a cyclone was going to hit the coastal area. Fortunately, our camp was not in its course, so most of the transport was being deputed to the other camp to rescue the others.

We dispersed and how this information brought about the bonhomie inside the tent! We cribbed in unison. We were jealous of the kids in the other camp. They were being evacuated and would be going home to good food, a warm bed and a life of leisure! We really wanted the cyclone to change its path and move towards our camp.

Well, we had a restless night and woke up to another day of drudgery. Our senior instructor delivered a lecture on leadership. The cadets moved to the ground for marching drills and in hindsight, I think that was the time when I realized the power of prayers being answered! Major N came and announced that the cyclone had changed its course and it might be possible that the camp would be in its path. Since I was standing near him, I could see the worried look in his eyes. He gave instructions to disperse and collect the gear as they would be shifting to the nearby school which was two and half miles away. Since most of the transport was already deputed to the other camp, there was a shortage and cadets would be rescued according to the gear packed first and so on.

With a great alacrity, we the lazy loggers were the first ones to run. We were still in the process of packing our tent when the strong winds hit us. We held on with our dear life. Then, suddenly it started raining heavily. One could see the tents, bags and other things flying all over. Captain Gomes shouted orders to abandon everything and run to the trucks parked nearby. We were huddled like sheep and rushed to the nearest school. There was water swirling everywhere. One could not see the road, but the sturdy and experienced military drivers maneuvered skillfully in the surging waters. With our hearts in our mouths, we reached the school.

The water in the school rooms was knee deep. The windows were broken, and we were sitting on the benches cross legged. Wet, hungry and scared – well I didn't exactly remember in which order. My mind was foggy and fuddled. The authorities were running around rescuing us from the predicament. Food was the first priority. It was five in the evening and we had not eaten since eight in the morning. Some good Samaritan from the nearby village brought a few savories and cookies for us. They were rationed and I was ordered to manage my group in the room, a duty I performed with utmost distaste!

We slept on the benches fitfully. I did hear some moaning and howling. I woke up to check on those morons and tried calming them. We woke up to a cloudy sky and strong winds. We were really hungry, miserable and fearful. Major N informed us that we might have to spend another night inside the school as the roads and train tracks were submerged. The news intensified the gloom. Around five in the evening we heard the shouts of "Hurray!" from the next room. The military trucks had come to take us to the nearest train station and soon we would be safe!

At midnight, I stood outside my house and rang the bell. My mother opened the door and the first thing I uttered was, "I will never forgive you! I hate you!" She was so glad to see me she ignored my barb and hugged me. I was so miserable that I pushed her away. She promised that after a real hot bath and my favorite English muffin with lots of butter and a sumptuous veggie omelet, I would definitely be laughing and see the funnier side of my experience. I blurted out that I could never laugh again in my whole life after such a terrible experience!

Well, mothers are always right! A hot bath, a warm blanket and hot dinner in bed did the trick. Halfway through my meal, I burst out laughing. My mother raised her eyebrows and smiled! I narrated how I saved my friend Tluanga from near death. The strong wind had uprooted the tent. Tenacious Tluanga held on to his rope and flew away with the tent. I quickly pushed Cody on to the tent and wrapped the rope around my waist and held onto the nearby tree. I asked Sameer to go around the

tree and hold on to my legs. Oh! The expression on the face of Cody holding onto Tluanga was really hilarious, short and stout Sameer holding onto my legs and reciting prayers to invoke the mercy of God along with Tluanga's muffled utterings which seemed to be cursing in his language was too funny. Fortunately, help arrived in time and we were rescued!

In the school at night, Anish, another boy from the camp woke up screaming that there was a snake wrapped around his ankles that was tightening every moment. I rushed to him as I had more experience with snakes because of trekking. But to everyone's relief it was just a very wet rope. How he was teased by the boys for this experience!

The next day, although we were hungry, I devised games, dumb charade to keep the gloom away. Later on, I was voted "The Best Camper." The experience brought out the best in me.

I remembered with real pleasure that defining moment that helped me to find my true potential. I learned the importance of planning, organizing and executing to handle any disaster. I looked forward to those moments where I could challenge myself. White water rafting, skiing camps at Auli, rock climbing, caving, shark cage diving, para gliding mountaineering, trekking in the Amazon forests, etc., etc. and now Mount Everest!

Before I fell asleep, I had already started planning, organizing and how to execute my next adventure to K2 mountain!

Redemption

By Rohan Sharma

As I rode my horse through the battlefield, I realized my father and my grandfather made sure this empire was built. It extended as far as the eye could see. My power can and will annihilate anyone, or anything, that stands in my way of victory. My empire is indestructible. However, as I look upon the carnage around me, listen to the silent screams of arrows whistling through the air towards their targets, hear the battle cries and screams of overpowered warriors, drown in the smell of ash and smoke, I wonder for the first time, is it all worth it?

One month has now passed since that day, and I now look upon my new territory, the land of Kalinga. When I arrived here, I felt emptiness. The broken gateway was made of gold columns. I could see that the city inside had clearly once been prosperous and the town hall was a beautiful piece of architecture. It was like a sparkling jewel in the light of the morning sun. Yet even this had not escaped the plague that enveloped the city. That's when I saw the pyres burning at the edge of the city. My bodyguards and I rode toward the flames. I could not believe my eyes. The smoke rising into the sky was all-consuming. The pyre preparers glared at me with sheer contempt and pure hatred. And in that moment, I experienced something I had never felt before – a shiver up my spine, trembling in my legs and an iciness in the air around me. Fear.

I had destroyed their homes, snatched their freedom, shattered their way of life, ruined their families and broken their spirit. Their hatred was righteous, and I was a monster. There was disgust in their eyes. But I, Ashoka, was supposed to be the greatest ruler of them all, and they should be worshipping me. All I had wanted was to have this area under my rule as a part of my vast and prosperous kingdom. I did not want to destroy this land.

When we got back to my palace, I asked my advisor how many people had died during the battle. He replied, "Over 100,000."

One hundred-thousand lives lost! And I was the monster responsible for this atrocious act. That night, I was haunted by the feeling of death. I saw it, smelled it, heard it and even touched it. And yet, I was back there the next morning and the next after that. The streets that once smelled of jasmine and roses, now reeked of burning flesh. The houses where mothers once sang lullabies were now filled with painful wailings of wives and children. The blank eyes and stone faces of people going about their work as if mechanically, hit me hard. Their grief and my guilt were unbearable.

Even my mother's affectionate embrace could not alleviate the guilt I felt. I remembered her words. She had tried her level best to dissuade me from waging this war. But I was blinded by power and ambition. I wanted it all. How could a small country like Kalinga have the audacity to refuse to subjugate to the mighty Emperor Ashoka!

And then, I suddenly came upon this little group of simply dressed young monks chanting and helping people tirelessly as if unaffected by their surroundings. I had seen them before, before the war and they seemed to have the same expression as they had now. They chanted and seemed to be at peace. Oddly enough, their calm composure in the midst of this chaos seemed very strange.

The words of an old and once nobleman of this town resounded in my ears, "Your apologetic words can never return us our lives, our country, our people. Your greed and ego have destroyed us all. Is this what you wanted? You are incapable of giving a single life but responsible for taking away so many others. Go away!"

It was almost twilight now. I saw the monks walking away. As they passed me, I expected the same hatred, but there was none. This intrigued me and I started following them, as if a force was guiding me. I was oblivious to where I was headed until I reached the edge of their monastery. They entered and I followed. I was guided by another young monk inside the monastery. I felt a strange peace in the air and a calming silence amongst the chants. I knelt at the feet of the senior monk who looked at me. I recognized him. I had seen him before. My mother listened to his discourses often.

“O, Holy one, I cannot sleep. I cannot eat. I am lost. Help me.”

“Get up, O courageous one,” he said. “You were lost, and now you are found.”

“What do I do, to make things right?” I asked.

“Try and help rebuild the lost glory, win the hearts, and not the acres. Give up violence. Help treat the wounds of the injured.”

“I will,” I replied, and I did.

The next morning, I gave orders to immediately open treatment centers and hospitals for all the people affected by the battle. Shelters were to be opened for anyone and everyone requiring a place to stay. All steps were to be taken and state resources employed to bring back normalcy to the lives of the people affected by this war.

I pledged, there would never again be another Kalinga war in my lifetime. I would dedicate the rest of my life to development and upliftment of people in every way possible.

This was inspired by a true story: The Battle of Kalinga was a life changing event in the life of the Indian Emperor Ashok. After the Battle of Kalinga, Ashoka converted to Buddhism, and went as far and wide as he could possibly go, all the while promoting non-violence. He was the Emperor of the Maurya Dynasty and established the most powerful empire in the Indian subcontinent. He is most famously remembered for his architectural marvels, including the three headed lion, and Ashoka's Chakra, which lies in the center of the Indian national flag.

A Silent World

By Angela Shwe

Zach and Ginger were best friends. They both had fun at the playground together and played tag, hide-n-seek and tic-tac-toe. Zach got out some toy cars and handed one to Ginger. Both of them crashed cars into each other and Zach thought of something.

“Hey, Ginger?” Zach asked in a soft voice while holding his toy Lamborghini.

“Yes, what is it?” Ginger replied with a happy reaction while choosing another car to pick from the box.

“Do you promise me you will never get in a car crash and never leave me?” Zach whimpered while looking at Ginger with a frown.

“Of course not! Why would that ever happen? I promise I would never!” Ginger exclaimed with a shocked face.

“Promise? Forever?” Zach mumbled kicking the wood chips on the ground.

“Promise!” Ginger said, holding Zach’s head up. They both pinkie promised and continued playing with the cars while giggling and smiling. They both had fun for a while but then it was getting late.

“Ginger! We have to go now!” Kira cried out to Ginger while she was packing up her things. Kira was Ginger’s mom.

“Aww, already!” Ginger shouted back with a sad tone handing her toy car to Zach.

“You want ice cream, don’t you? And you can meet up with Zach next Sunday!” Kira shouted with a sigh.

“Wait, really? I get ice cream finally! Okay Mommy! I’m coming!” Ginger smiled and ran to her mother. “Bye Zach!” Ginger cried out.

“Bye bye...” Zach mumbled sadly watching her run to her mother. Kira and Ginger walked to Jerry’s ice cream store in the distance while Zach was just staring. Zach ran to his mother and started to sob loudly.

“Oh my God Zach! What’s wrong?” Ari asked Zach, confused. Ari was Zach’s mom.

“Mommy! I miss Ginger already! Can we get ice cream too?” Zach sobbed.

“Zach, you know that you can’t eat ice cream because of your diet.” Ari sighed, she looked at Zach while he cried on her lap.

Ginger finally got to go to Jerry’s yummy ice cream store after begging her mom to go for the past six weeks. She really wanted that birthday cake flavor she loved eating in the summer. After getting ready, Ginger and her mom were walking to the ice cream store. Ginger was so excited that she quickly ran across the street and something horrible happened. People walking on the sidewalks stopped and were gasping at Ginger as her mom screamed. “Ginger! My daughter! Call an ambulance now!” Kira shouted loudly. Everybody was so surprised and felt so bad. That was the time Ginger got run over by a car.

The ambulance came and parked near the accident. Ginger was just lying there like she was dead. Her mother explained what happened and kept sobbing in the middle of sentences. The ambulance took Ginger in the back of the vehicle. “I hope she will be okay,” Kira whispered to herself while crying on the hard concrete ground. “My daughter... She was only eight!” Kira cried out in tears.

Then a nice old lady came up to Kira and comforted, “Oh don’t cry, I think she will be okay.”

Kira slowly looked up at the nice old lady and smiled at her but then the smile faded away after three seconds.

“What’s your name honey?” the old lady asked.

“K-Kira,” Kira mumbled while her arms hugged herself.

“Alright Kira, let’s take you home. You have had a long day,” the old lady said with her hand outstretched towards Kira. Kira held her hand and got up. They both chatted and talked about how Ginger was going to be okay and how everything would be fine.

By the time Kira got home she waved to the old lady and dropped on her knees sobbing out all her tears thinking about Ginger. She couldn’t stand up. Kira got a call on her phone. She opened her purse and sat by the front door.

“Hello? What do you need?” Kira asked while hugging herself with her other arm.

“Hello ma’am! You may visit your daughter right now if you’d like. Otherwise, you can show up tomorrow but that’s your only chance. Have a good day ma’am,” said the hospital worker and hung up before Kira could say a thing.

Kira had no time. She stood up, grabbed her keys and her water, and then burst out of the front door. “I’m coming Ginger. Don’t worry,” Kira sighed with a small smile on her face.

Kira got in her car and went to the hospital as fast as she could without going over the speed limit. While Kira was driving, she was thinking of things to say to Ginger. It was going to be the last thing she would say for a month. She wasn’t going to be able to visit Ginger while the hospital helped her recover.

When she arrived at the hospital she quickly got out of her car and rushed to the hospital room. Kira kept checking back at the emails she got from the hospital to find the correct room. When she found the room, she was so happy to see Ginger, but she was too late.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry but you have to leave, you can’t visit your daughter now,” one of the nurses said politely. Kira was shocked and confused, her smile dropped.

“But I came here in time! That’s impossible! No, I refuse to leave. I need to check on my daughter right now!” Kira shouted very angry. She didn’t want to leave her daughter. Kira was so angry she kept complaining that she was on time and wanted to see her daughter.

“I’m very sorry ma’am but please leave. Your daughter is all good, you have a chance to visit her next month. We just need to do some tests on her and it’s all good,” the nurse sighed and waved at her with a disgusted look under her mask.

Kira took a deep breath, calmed down and said, “Okay, I’m sorry for my behavior. I’ll check on her after a month. I’ll be patient.” Kira waved back at the nurse and took off trying to be calm and patient.

When Kira got home, she was so disappointed. She dropped herself on the floor and started to call Ginger’s father. She waited for him to pick up, but he took forever. She got up and put her phone in her purse.

“I hope you’re safe Ginger,” Kira whispered to herself and went to bed trying to forget everything that just happened.

After a month, Kira rushed to the hospital as fast as she could. By the time she got there she ran over to Ginger’s room and was so glad she didn’t die.

“Ginger! Are you okay?” Kira asked worriedly. Ginger didn’t say one word at all, and her eyes were shut like somebody had super glued her eyes. Kira thought she was dead, so she started shaking Ginger to make sure.

Ginger opened her eyes slowly. “Mom? Is that you?” Ginger sat up slowly with a surprised look.

“Yes, yes! It’s me Ginger!” Kira said thankfully that Ginger was not dead. Ginger’s smile drooped down, confused that she couldn’t hear her mother’s voice at all, she couldn’t even hear her own voice.

“Mom... Mom?!” Ginger cried out shocked and worried.

“Yes! Ginger what’s wrong I’m here!” Kira cried out holding Ginger’s arm.

Out of nowhere Ginger started sobbing, she couldn’t hear her mother at all. “Mom! Why can’t I hear you? Please talk to me!” Ginger cried loudly.

“Oh no! This can’t be! You’re too young to have this!” Kira whispered to herself and started crying as well with her. Ginger wiped off her mom’s tears and then wiped off her own tears after.

They both stared at each other for a minute, but then Kira grabbed a notebook and started writing with her pen that she had when she was a little kid. She wrote down the words she wanted to tell Ginger. “Ginger, I can’t tell you what’s wrong with you yet but please take good care of yourself. I love you sweetie,” Kira wrote down on the paper and showed Ginger the paper.

“Mommy? I’m scared. When will I go back home?” Ginger asked while rubbing her eyes to wipe away the tears in her eyes. Her mother sighed and continued to write on the paper. She showed Ginger the paper. “Ginger, you will come back home soon. Would you like me to invite Zach?” Kira showed Ginger with a soft smile on her face.

Ginger nodded.

Suddenly, one of the nurses came in and opened the door. “Hello Mrs. Fallon! You can take your daughter back home. I suggest you buy hearing aids for your daughter though. Have a nice day!” The nurse paused, then closed the door and went away. Kira was so excited to hear the news.

Kira got the paper and wrote down, “Good news Ginger! You’re coming back home!” She showed Ginger the message she wrote.

Ginger was so happy she got up the bed and grabbed her favorite penguin plushie. “I can’t believe I’m going home!” Ginger hugged her mother and then she grabbed her jacket and tugged Kira to hurry up and go home. Kira giggled and went off to the door with Ginger.

Later that night Ginger yawned and said, “Mommy, I’m sleepy,” while walking towards the desk Kira was standing next to.

Kira nodded at Ginger then she picked her up and walked up the stairs. After she got in Ginger’s room, she tucked her in her bed and waved to her while walking out of the room. “Goodnight Ginger,” Kira sighed while she closed the door behind her. Kira went to her room and went right to sleep.

The next morning, Ginger got ready for school and headed off to the bus while waving goodbye to her mother. While Ginger was on the bus, all the kids were in the back but there was only one person in the front of the bus. Ginger decided to sit with the lonely person. The moment between them was awkward but then the person lifted up their head. It was a girl. Ginger waved to her, maybe hoping she could understand she was deaf.

“Uh hey? Do you need anything?” the girl asked. Ginger saw that her mouth was moving but couldn’t hear a word at all. Before Ginger could say anything, the bus stopped. She was like her mother now, always getting interrupted. “Well, we better get off then,” the girl held out her hand waiting for Ginger to grab it. Ginger looked at her then the hand. She grabbed it and got off the bus.

“Hey uh, sorry if I was being awkward. I’m actually deaf but I can speak well,” Ginger whispered to her. The girl was surprised. Then she grabbed her phone.

“My name is Alianna Usoro. I see that you do talk well. What’s your name?” Alianna introduced and asked Ginger on her phone and showed it to Ginger.

“My name is Ginger Fallon! My friend Zach isn’t in this school today, I think. Maybe we could be friends?” Ginger asked while they were going into the school building.

Alianna nodded and they both went to their classroom. After they went inside the classroom, everybody was sitting at their desk and the teacher began to do a reading review. Ginger was scared that the other kids would make fun of her for being deaf. Alianna showed Ginger to her desk and they both sat and listened to the teacher.

“Alright class! Please come up to me if you have questions on these papers!” Ms. Penelope cried out to all the students while passing papers to all desks.

Ginger was afraid to tell Ms. Penelope she was deaf. She was unsettled and thought if the other kids heard her, they would make fun of her.

While Ms. Penelope passed out the papers on Alianna's and Ginger's desk, Alianna blurted out, "Ms. Penelope. Ginger is deaf so she wasn't able to hear your directions."

Ms. Penelope nodded and set her papers down on her desk. Ginger raised her hand trying not to make eye contact with the other kids.

"Yes Ginger?" Ms. Penelope saw Ginger's hand raised.

"Can I use the restroom please? It's an emergency!" Ginger hesitated.

Ms. Penelope nodded and continued to talk to the whole class again. Ginger ran all the way to the restrooms. She locked herself in a stall and lamented. All of a sudden, somebody started banging and shaking the restroom stall.

"Who's there! Go away!" Ginger cried out.

"It's me... Your best friend..." the unknown person whispered.

Ginger was afraid to unlock the stall. The power went out and the person left. After a few minutes, Ginger unlocked the stall and saw a note on the ground.

"Did I do something wrong, Ginger? I didn't mean to! You ignored me... Am I invisible! Talk to me Ginger. I need to know why!" Ginger was very shocked at the note she just read. She was traumatized.

"I'm sorry whoever this was. I didn't know!" Ginger whispered, then walked out of the bathroom until she saw a mysterious person standing in the dark. "Who are you? Please leave me alone!" Ginger stuttered, afraid of looking exactly at that unknown person.

"Your best friend," the person laughed. Ginger was confused and worried. All of a sudden, the person walked over towards Ginger in a spooky way.

Ginger screamed while her eyes were shut. Then something strange happened. Ginger was back on her bed in her house. She saw her mother crying.

"Mommy, are you okay?" Ginger asked while patting her mom's head.

"Ginger, you're awake! Yes, I'm okay! Are you okay too?" Kira cried out while wiping off her tears looking at Ginger. Ginger realized everything that just happened was just a bad dream. She wasn't deaf anymore. How long had she been sleeping?

"I'm okay Mommy. Let's go and get ice cream! I promise I'll be careful crossing the street," Ginger said as she smiled.

The end... or is it?

The Crash

By Annabelle Skurkay

It was a rainy day in Honolulu, Hawaii. My name is Lilliana, and I am nine years old. On this trip it will be my mom, dad and my seven-year-old brother Connor. We boarded the plane at 7 a.m. to fly out to Indiana to see my Granny and Grandpa. We were only in the air for an hour before the flight attendants started to warn us the plane may go down. Everyone went into panic and prayed.

To keep us calm they started handing out cookies and water for a snack. As they were trying to hand out snacks the plane started to shake and go out of control. I could not even tell where I was, at this point I blacked out.

I opened my eyes and we were heading towards a volcano. My brother started to slip out of his seat. He went through the window and flew inside of the hot lava volcano. We were all devastated but we could not lose each other anymore. They gave us flotation devices because we might go into the deep waters where there are many mysterious sea creatures. Finally, the plane sank. We started with 346 people in the plane and now there are only 25 left. The rest unfortunately passed.

We were swimming to shore for our lives. My parents were left behind because I took professional swimming lessons from an Olympic gold medalist. I took a look behind me and I saw a shark chewing up my mom. She was screaming but nobody could help her. My dad and I kept swimming, but he could not swim anymore and I was unable to pull him, so he had to give up and unfortunately drowned.

I had to swim to shore myself with this other young girl who is 10 and named Olivia. We were alone and the only survivors. I ran across the beach and found a woman with three kids and asked her for help. She immediately called the police.

When the police came, they took us to an adoption center. I wanted to stay with the kind lady who helped us because that would be a loving home. We made a deal with the adoption center that Olivia and I would stay together no matter the circumstances.

Once we got to a home, both of us met our new foster parents, Karen and Jim. They were mentally and physically abusive. We hated it there. All I was trying to do was get out. There was no way. They would be so mad at us if we contacted the police.

We got to school and told our teacher. She called the police immediately and offered to take us in. Of course, we said yes. Little did we know she lived on a farm and had 16 kids. They had no time for us. We were forgotten about and had to raise ourselves.

I made the executive decision to confront Karen and Jim, but they were not understanding. So, we contacted the head woman of the adoption center, Miss Savannah. She asked us if we had a preference. We thought back to the woman who helped us first. Her name was Stephanie. Miss Savannah called Stephanie and she agreed. We packed our bags and she picked us up at the adoption center. Now we live an amazing life with a family who loves us. That is my story on the crash.

Jeff and Ed, The Crime Fighting Duo

By Devin Vanryswyk

It all began in an alley. And with a pigeon.

Jeff lived in New York. He had a pet pigeon named Ed. Jeff found Ed in an alley. Ed was the oldest bird alive. Ed had rainbow feathers, a very long beard and could make sandwiches. Jeff and Ed were best friends for life. They ate Ed's sandwiches.

One day, the town started rumbling. Jeff and Ed wondered what was happening. It was Toilet Man. Toilet Man was launching a burrito. Toilet man is a toilet who was friends with Jeff and Ed for a long time. Toilet Man turned evil because his mom wouldn't buy him a burrito. Toilet Man was so evil he put a toilet in the city, but Jeff and Ed stopped him with an air freshener because he stunk. Jeff and Ed could not figure out why the ground was rumbling. Jeff and Ed went to their hideout.

Jeff said, "I want to wear the super guy costume."

Ed squealed, "It's not fair that you get the super guy costume, but I will wear the man sandwich."

Jeff laughed, "You look funny."

Ed figured, "I know."

Jeff asked, "Are we going to stop the toilet or what?"

Jeff and Ed were getting in the sandwich jet to stop Toilet Man. Toilet Man is the evilest toilet ever. One time he even pranked the mayor.

Ed said, "Why did he prank the mayor?"

Jeff said, "I don't know why."

Soon Jeff and Ed found Toilet Man and asked, "Why did you prank the mayor?"

Toilet Man said, "Because he's fun to prank and it's funny."

Jeff said, "Well stop pranking the mayor because you are so scary." Ed nervously made 1,255 sandwiches.

Toilet Man said, "I will stop pranking the mayor only on one condition."

Jeff asked, "What is the condition?"

Toilet Man said, "The condition is you let me have all the sewage water and then I'll leave the mayor alone."

Jeff said, "We will let you have the sewage water but never bother us again."

Toilet Man said, "It's a deal."

Now Toilet Man is a good toilet and will never bother anyone again. Jeff and Ed saved the mayor from Toilet Man. Toilet man is gone for now and hopefully forever. Jeff and Ed went back to their hideout, but on the way, they saw a house on fire. It was FireDude.

FireDude worked at a lab, so he did an experiment on himself. One morning FireDude came into his office and spilled some kind of goo on himself and made himself into a monster. FireDude burst into flames and his face became a skull. When FireDude touched his dirt bike it burst into flames.

Jeff said, "What is happening?"

Ed questioned, "It's a human torch I think?"

Jeff and Ed were confused on what the fire was. This is the strangest super villain ever. This would be tough for Jeff and Ed because Jeff and Ed had never fought anything like this before. This would be tough.

Jeff wondered, "What are we supposed to do, throw sandwiches or what?"

Ed answered, "I don't know. Maybe throw rocks at him and the fire on his body will go out."

Jeff answered, "Sure, in movies you drop and roll on a surface so maybe it will work?"

Jeff and Ed threw everything they could throw at the human torch, but the fire wouldn't go out.

Jeff cried, "What are we going to do? We can't put the human torch out!"

Jeff and Ed were going to drive the sandwich mobile to the local lake to get water to stop FireDude.

FireDude shouted, "What are you going to do with that bucket of..."

Splash. FireDude's fire has gone out and FireDude was not dangerous anymore.

Ed yelled, "What do we do with FireDude now Jeff?"

Jeff replied, "We bring him to the water park and bring him to the fish tank."

Ed had a good feeling that Jeff was right because there is water in water parks and in fish tanks so he can't catch on fire again. Jeff and Ed went back to their hideout and played Super Guys Save The City. After they played Super Guys, they decide to go to Dino Town and go to find dinosaur teeth that were lying around. When Jeff and Ed got there a huge dino-man appeared.

His name was Dino Kid. Dino Kid has sharp teeth that could bite through metal. Dino kid was the worst because he could bite through so many sandwiches.

Ed cried, "What do we do now?"

Jeff answered, "We feed it all the metal we have."

Jeff and Ed fed all the metal they could but then they remembered that they had dino spray. Dino spray is a spray that makes dinosaurs scared of the people who use it. Dino Kid was suddenly in big trouble. Jeff and Ed were never going to Dino Town again.

Jeff yawned, "Ed, I'm going to bed."

Ed blinked, "Yeah I am too."

Jeff and Ed were sleeping until something turned on the TV in Jeff's room. Jeff woke up and he went to see who turned on the TV. Of course, it was Ed watching The Flash on Netflix.

Jeff asked, "What are you doing watching The Flash in the dark at two in the morning, Ed?"

Ed replied, "Um, watching the best movie ever. Why is there something wrong? Do you want to watch The Flash with me?"

Jeff happily smiled, "Yes, I will watch it with you."

Jeff and Ed fell asleep while watching The Flash together. The next morning they got an alert. There was a tsunami on the beach.

Ed whispered, "Let's stop the tsunami."

Jeff screamed, "I can't fight anymore!"

Ed cried, "Why? Is it because you don't want to move?"

The ground below Jeff and Ed started splitting apart. This meant they had to compromise and figure this out.

To be continued...

The Adventure Girls

By Amara Vanthavong

One day two little girls, Ella and Avery, were getting ready for bed. They were staying the night at their grandma's house.

"Grandma! Grandma!" squealed Ella. "Can you read us a story?"

"Please!" Begged Avery.

"Alright, alright let's see," Grandma agreed. "Let's read this one," Grandma suggested. "It's an adventure story about two girls that find out they have powers," Grandma explained.

"Wow," the girls yelled excitedly.

Grandma started to read the book. Grandma was so good at reading that Ella and Avery felt like they were in the story. "Once upon a time there were two girls named Everleigh and Sydney." Grandma smiled at the two girls as she read. Grandma turned the page, "Sydney and Everleigh were twins. One day their dad took them outside to give them a surprise for their birthday. There were little presents on a table. Sydney and Everleigh opened them."

"Oh my gosh!" Everleigh and Sydney yelled surprisingly." Grandma paused and smiled. She then continued to read...

"I got a bunny!" Everleigh shouted excitedly.

"I got a guinea pig!" Sydney said excitedly.

Everleigh's bunny was a tan and a white color. Sydney's guinea pig was a dark brown color.

"Is this a girl or a boy?" Sydney questioned.

"Yours is a boy and Everleigh's is a girl," their dad explained.

"Hey girl!" Everleigh giggled.

A few days later the girls were trying to figure out what they were going to name their pets.

"Hmmm what about Willow, Ally or Daisy?" Everleigh wondered.

"Daisy is a cute name. I am naming mine Max," Sydney exclaimed.

That night the girls were getting ready for bed. All of a sudden Sydney and Everleigh heard a strange noise.

"What's that noise?" Everleigh wondered.

"I don't know?" Sydney whispered.

"Oh no!" Sydney gasped.

Daisy and Max jumped out of the window. They were running toward the forest. All of a sudden, they disappeared and they were out of sight.

"Where are they going!" Everleigh worried.

"I don't know why they are heading to the forest. Get your shoes on. We have to find them! Pack a backpack with a blanket and clothes!" Sydney suggested.

"Got it!" Everleigh agreed.

When the girls got outside Daisy and Max were gone!

"Where are they?" Everleigh worried.

"I don't know, I remember when I saw them out of the window, they were running to the forest so we should search the forest to find them." Sydney explained.

The girls started searching in the forest but they had no luck.

“Everleigh, I think we should go back inside and find them in the morning. It’s really dark out here and it would be better for us to go out tomorrow,” Sydney suggested.

The next morning the girls went back to the forest. They searched and called their pets’ names. They could not find them. One thing they did find was something shiny in the grass.

“What’s that?” Everleigh questioned.

“I have no idea. It’s a light shining out of the grass,” Sydney was shocked.

“We should dig and see if anything is under there,” Everleigh suggested.

The girls began digging to see what they would find. When the girls were done digging, they found a bottle with a note inside. The girls opened the bottle and the note said:

Dear Everleigh and Sydney,

I know you are looking for your pets. Before you get them back you have to find the last purple gem on earth. You have five years until February 18, at sunset in the year 2026 to find it. If you do not make it, you will NEVER get your pets back! This purple gem is really rare and hard to find so that’s why you are given five years to search. If found the gem needs to be given back to me.

Sincerely, Mr. Mystery

“Who’s Mr. Mystery?” Sydney wondered.

“I don’t know. It says that we have to find a purple gem, but it did not say where the purple gem is or what state it is in, so where do we look first?” wondered Everleigh.

Five years later...

Everleigh and Sydney have still not found the purple gem and it has been a long time! The year is 2026. It has been five years! It is January 5, and they only have one month and 13 days left! All of a sudden, they wake up and are in an unknown state.

“Awh, good morning. Wait where are we? Sydney, wake up, wake up!” Everleigh was shocked. “Where are we?”

“Fine, wait where are we?” Sydney wondered.

“That’s what I said!” Everleigh yelled.

“I will check my watch. Everleigh! We are in the future. It is 2026! We have gone ahead in time!” Sydney was shocked.

“What?! Well, all I know is that this is not our backyard!” Everleigh worried.

“My watch isn’t saying where we are! Wait, it’s loading... We are in an unknown state!” Sydney was shocked.

“Wait, how did we even get here?” Everleigh wondered.

“I have no idea but remember that night on our birthday? Max and Daisy jumped out of the window. Then that night we went to go look for them, but it was too dark so when we went the next day there was a strange note in a bottle. The note said that we had five years to find a purple gem. The note also said we had to until 2026 on February 18 at 5:45 p.m. at sunset, and if we didn’t make it then we wouldn’t get our pets back! We also look different! And we don’t even know where we are. Also, Dad is probably freaking out right now because he has not seen his daughters for five years!” Sydney freaked out.

“Sydney, calm down,” Everleigh suggested.

Sydney calmed down. Then she looked at her watch.

“Everleigh, we only have one month, 13 days and three hours to find the gem!” Sydney yelled.

“Wait, what?! I just wish we had superpowers so we could find the gem faster.” Everleigh wished.

All of a sudden, magical watches appeared on the girls’ arms.

“What just happened? Why did watches appear on our wrists?” Everleigh was shocked.

“I have no idea but look, mine has the word water on it and yours says ice. I think we are supposed to press on these buttons,” Sydney suggested.

Each time Everleigh and Sydney pressed their watches they were in different clothes. Everleigh had a blue costume with a wave that stood for water, and Sydney had a white costume with an icicle that stood for ice. Their costumes were so cool. But what do these powers mean?

They spent the day playing with their powers. They were having fun. It was February 17, and they had not found the gem yet. They were starting to give up. Out of nowhere they could smell smoke.

“Do you smell that? I think something is on fire,” Everleigh worried.

“We can use our powers to help,” Sydney exclaimed.

The girls began running towards the smoke. A village of gnomes was on fire! Everleigh started shooting her icicles and Sydney used her power to spray water. Their powers were working! The two girls spent hours fighting the fire. After the fires were out, little gnomes started coming out of their hiding spots.

“You have saved us!” The village gnomes were thankful. “We have a gift for you!” They presented the girls with the most beautiful purple gem and their mission was complete.

As soon as they took the purple gem, they woke up as if nothing had happened. It was 2021 again. Their guinea pig and bunny were safe in their cage. Mr. Mystery never showed up to take the gem, but they were happy that they saved the villagers.

“And that is the story of Sydney and Everleigh, the adventure girls,” Grandma explained.

“What?” said Ella and Avery together. “Grandma Sydney is this story about you?!” the girls asked. They had so many questions. Was their Grandma a twin? Was this her adventure they wondered?

“Now girls this is just a story, and it is getting late and time for bed,” Grandma explained. Grandma tucked the girls into bed and left the room. The girls were wide awake.

“Did Grandma find that gem?” Avery questioned.

Ella looked over at the table in the bedroom and saw a shiny purple gem that started to glow up in the dark. Was that the gem that never made it to Mr. Mystery? They laid awake that night wondering if they would become the next adventure girls.

When Ella and Avery woke up the next day, they went to the kitchen to eat breakfast. After they were done with their breakfast, they went to grandma’s room to wake her up. But then Ella and Avery noticed that grandma wasn’t there. They looked everywhere and they even called her name.

“Grandma, grandma!” the girls called out.

Then they saw a note on her dresser. It said:

Dear Ella and Avery,

I will be gone for a while; the forest needs me again. I don’t know how long I will be gone. You will have to take care of yourself until I come back. I am very sorry. If there is an emergency push the red button by the coffee maker. Only use it for emergencies.

Sincerely, Grandma

To be continued...

Regina and the Community Changers Club

By Sophia Williams

The class stared up at their teacher, who clapped his hands loudly. “Class, may I have your attention?”

Any whispering that may have been going on ceased as the class leaned intently toward Mr. Clark. Announcements like these were seldom, so it was a treat when they happened.

“Class,” Mr. Clark said again. “We have a field trip to a real cave coming up!”

The class cheered. The love of field trips was real.

“I’m going to send home a permission slip for your parents. There is an admission fee, but our awesome PTO has offered to pay for half of it. Any questions?”

A boy in the back of the room named Ulrich raised his hand. “How much does it cost?” he asked anxiously. “My family doesn’t have a lot of money.”

“Your family will need to pay \$10.”

Ulrich nodded. A murmur broke out and Mr. Clark clapped his hands again. “Class! I forgot to say you will need to bring a sack lunch!”

Seven-year-old Regina DeLaCampe smiled. “Sack lunches are my favorite!” she exclaimed into the noise.

Her best friend Mercie nodded, “I love sack lunches too! I love it because I get a chocolate bar and a juice box!”

“Presley! Why don’t you pass out these permission slips?” Mr. Clark asked the dark-haired girl sitting primly, front and center.

“Oh, of course, Mr. Clark! I’d love to help you!” she answered in that awful, sickly-sweet voice.

“Leave it to the teacher’s pet!” mouthed Regina’s other best friend, Krystina. Regina and Mercie nodded in agreement.

At lunch, the other second-grade teacher, Miss Calypso, took Regina, Krystina and Mercie aside. “Your teacher recommended you for a special program that we’re doing. He said that you girls are creative and caring, which is what we’re looking for. We are a club that’s trying to start a school-wide movement to change the community. Would you girls like to participate? We already have your parents’ consent.”

The girls looked at each other. “We’d love to!”

Miss Calypso smiled. “Great. I’m very excited to have you join. We will meet in the gym at 2:30 this afternoon.”

At 2:30 p.m., Regina, Mercie and Krystina walked tensely to the gymnasium. In there, they saw a lot of third, fourth, and fifth graders, but no other second graders. Miss Calypso had left out that part.

“Are we in the right place?” asked Krystina, looking around shyly.

Just then, they saw who looked like a fifth-grade version of Presley.

“You guys are supposed to be outside. We’re having the Community Changers meeting right now,” she flipped her high ponytail.

Just then, Miss Calypso walked by. “Actually Paisley, these girls are supposed to be here. I’d like to see more inclusion from you, very disappointing.”

She looked stunned and said, “Oh, Miss Calypso, I am so sorry!” in the same sickly-sweet way as Presley.

“Apologize to them sincerely, Paisley. I mean it. We’ll have to kick you out of our team if you can’t show respect.”

“I’m so sorry.” She looked sorry. Probably because she’d get kicked out, thought Regina.

Miss Calypso clapped her hands, two long claps and three short ones. The students clapped back. “I have gotten a substitute para for my classroom on Wednesday afternoons from now on. I would like to tell you why you’re all here. You have been hand-picked by your teachers to represent your grade in changing the community — starting with our own ACNE (Ashtown, Cedarbrook, Newton Elementary). Get into groups of your grade level and think of a couple of plans to change your community and carry them out!”

“What do you mean?” asked a fourth grader. “What do you mean by a couple of plans?”

“Something good that will help people!”

Regina, Mercie and Krystina huddled on the cold gym floor. “We could cut our hair for Locks for Love!” Krystina suggested. That meant a lot coming from Krystina, who loved every inch of her waist-long brown hair that was always vanilla bean scented and shiny.

“Or we could start a community garden! And give people free fruits and veggies!” Mercie suggested.

Regina knew what she wanted to do. “You know when Ulrich said his family didn’t have a lot of money this morning?” His words still haunted her. “What if we made a field-trip fund that paid for kids going on field trips and also provided sack lunches?”

Krystina nodded. “Yes. That’s a good idea, but...” she trailed off. “It’s better than all of us chopping off our hair, but it’s kind of specific. I’ve heard of towns around us having something called a food shelf. Where people volunteer and other people can go get free food!”

Mercie cocked her head from side to side. “That’s cool, but a bit ambitious, don’t you think?”

Krystina nodded. “We know the older kids will probably do better.”

Regina was indignant. “No way! We can totally get a better idea!” She made a contemplating face. “How about we do all of the ideas?”

Mercie shook her head. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

Regina furrowed her eyebrows. “What don’t you follow about it? If we’re willing, we’ll cut our hair! If we want to, we can build a garden! If we can, we can collect money for field trips!”

Mercie and Krystina shared a skeptical glance. “Uhm, not to be rude or anything, but doesn’t that sound a bit — I don’t know, ambitious?”

Regina didn’t know what ‘ambitious’ meant, but it sounded negative. “It sounds over-the-top, yes, but that’s why we’re going to recruit all of the second-graders in the school!”

The next morning, Mr. Clark and Miss Calypso’s classes were sending home permission slips not for another field trip, but to help change the community. By Friday, most kids’ parents had said yes to them helping the Community Changer’s Club (ACNE Tri-C) on Saturday.

Regina, Mercie and Krystina stood in front of the grade. They clapped loudly, just like the teachers did. “Okay!” shouted Regina. “We need to split into three groups! How many of you are willing to donate hair?” A group of girls raised their hands.

“Great! Now, who would like to help plant a garden?” Several boys and girls raised their hands.

“And finally, who would like to go around collecting money for field trip funds?” The rest of the grade raised their hands.

“Awesome! Thank you guys so much! If you’re donating hair, meet Krystina Hayes at the hair shop in Ashtown at 10 a.m. tomorrow. If you’re planting a garden, meet Mercie Leighton at 123 1st Street in Newton at 9:30 a.m. And the rest of you, come with me now!” Regina felt important leading a third of the grade to a corner of the hall. “How many of you live in Ashtown?” Several kids raised their hands. “Cedarbrook?” More kids. “The rest of you live in or near Newton?” They nodded.

Miss Calypso came back from the copy room and handed out a stack of papers to each kid. “When you go asking for money, give each home this flier so they know what they’re supporting.”

On Saturday at 9:30 a.m., Mercie Leighton’s lawn was full of second graders and their families planting seeds and making a sign.

On Saturday at 10 a.m., the hair shop in Ashtown was full of second graders and their big and little siblings and parents, all donating to Locks for Love.

On Saturday at 10:30 a.m., Ashtown, Newton and Cedarbrook were full of second graders and their families collecting money for the field trip fund.

By Saturday at 5 p.m., there was a completely planted community garden that will provide free vegetables and fruits for everyone. There were 41 wigs worth of hair being sent to Locks for Love. There was \$247 for the field trip fund. By Saturday at 5 p.m., there were also many proud second-grade families.

A month later, at the end of May right before school let out, Regina walked into the school like it was a normal day. She slung her backpack into her locker and walked into her classroom. Inside a happy, proud-looking Mr. Clark and a man with a camera. Mercie and Krystina rushed at her and began talking over each other.

“They’re going to interview the whole grade!”

“We’re going to be on national TV!”

“Huh? I just got here. What?”

Mr. Clark walked over. “This is the camera crew from Channel 6. They want to talk to you three. You will be on the six o’clock news!”

Regina’s eyes grew as they were beckoned into the hall. “Really?” she squeaked.

The cameraman turned on the camera and the reporter began talking, “I’m here at Ashtown, Cedarbrook, Newton Elementary in Ashtown, Minnesota with Krystina Hayes, Mercie Leighton, and Regina DeLaCampe, the masterminds behind the ‘ACNE Miracle.’”

At 6 p.m., 46 proud second-grade families sat around their TVs.

“What made you guys think up such an extraordinary plan?” the reporter asked.

“It wasn’t just us. We had a lot of help.” Replied Regina DeLaCampe.

Soon, all 46 second graders were on camera saying, “We did it to help people. It’s not fair that some people have to go without hair, fresh food or not be able to go places everyone else can go.”

Then the camera panned to Regina, Mercie and Krystina. The reporter asked, “What is it like to be recognized as the brilliant, caring second graders who changed the community?”

They shook their heads. “All that matters is that we helped.” And for some reason, Regina was blinking back tears of joy.

Teddy Bear

By Sophia Williams

Five-year-old Leo walked down the steps of the bus and waved good-bye to his friends. He found his thirteen-year-old sister, Violet, grabbed her hand, and the two walked four blocks to their small one-level house.

Their mother was leaving and said, "I need groceries. Help yourself to a snack. Violet, can you look after Leo? Everlee should just be waking up from her nap." Everlee is their 2-year-old sister.

Violet opened the cupboard, took out some graham crackers and handed a few to Leo. "I have homework. I'll be in my room." She walked to her bedroom at the back of the house. "Call me if you need anything."

Leo sat down with his toy trucks and his teddy bear. Then, he heard crying. He ran to Everlee's crib. She was awake and crying. "Mommy!" she sobbed. "I want Mommy!"

"Violet!" Leo called. "Vi, come quick! Everlee's crying!" He peeked his head into her room. She was sitting on her bed with a thick textbook and headphones on.

He ran back to Everlee. What would Mommy do? "What's the matter, Ev?"

"My bunny!" she cried. "She's gone!" Everlee's bunny was her favorite toy.

"It's okay! Don't worry, Ev! We'll find her!" Mommy would've rocked her, but Leo was too small. He ran around frantically, looking for her bunny. There was no sign of her and Everlee was still sobbing.

"Bunny!" she cried. "I need you! I need you!"

Leo knew what he had to do. He ran into the living room and picked up his favorite teddy bear and hugged him tightly. Leo felt a pang in his heart.

The teddy bear was carried to Everlee's crib and nestled into her arms. "Leo, you're the best brother ever," she said. Everlee fell asleep smiling.

Nonfiction

Non-Fiction (True/Factual):

Personal narrative: A true story that describes a real event or experiences in the author's life.

Information: Factual writing to convey knowledge of a topic and research findings.

Essay/Opinion: A feeling or thought you have about a subject or topic, supported by research.

Four Words that Inspired America

By Lila Adams

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great man who changed the world and inspired the future. He made a difference by helping people of color earn rights and respect. “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” He said things about people of color that have changed the perspective of many white people, and what he said is still useful today.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. He had a brother and a sister, a loving mother, and a caring father. His father preached at Ebenezer Baptist church. His mother often played the organ and sang at their church.

Young Dr. King was having fun playing together with a white friend, but the boy’s mother came and said she did not want them to play together anymore. She did not want her child to play with a Black child. Young Dr. King ran home, crying.

A few years later, at the age of 15, Dr. King graduated from Booker T. Washington High School. Because he was a prodigious student, he graduated earlier than most because he skipped the ninth and twelfth grades. He then went to and graduated from Morehouse College. After that, he went to Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania so he could become a Baptist minister, like his father. After he became a Baptist minister, Dr. King went back to college, to Boston University, to get his doctorate degree.

While Dr. King was working toward his doctorate degree, he met a woman named Coretta Scott. Dr. King fell in love and got married to her. Then he and Coretta moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he finished his doctorate degree. He had four children: Yolanda King, Bernice King, Martin Luther King III, and Dexter King.

Dr. King gave the Bus Boycott speech after Rosa Parks had been arrested. She had been arrested for sitting in the front of the bus where only white people were permitted. He wanted a way to protest, but peacefully. The bus boycott meant that no people of color would go on the buses. Instead, they would walk to work, to their houses, to school or to wherever they needed to be. The bus boycott lasted 381 days! It helped change the law. Soon, people of color were able to sit in the front of the bus, too.

Dr. King traveled to Washington, D.C. for The March on Washington. As he prepared for what would be his most famous speech, he had no intention of mentioning anything about the dream he had. On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before 250,000 people and began speaking. But then, Mahalia Jackson, a friend, and famous gospel singer cried out, “Tell them about the dream, Martin!” And so he did.

This speech was a defining moment for America. These are some of the highlights of his speech: “I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream ... I have a dream that one day ... sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood ... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ... I have a dream that one day ... black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers ... And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, ... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants

and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'"

The March on Washington was peaceful and law-changing. It gave people of color the right to have full and fair employment, the right to decent housing, the right to vote and the right to have better education.

Dr. King was later awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. He was the youngest man to be awarded the Prize. He donated the prize money to the Civil Rights Movement Act.

On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was coming out of his motel room to eat dinner with his friends and was assassinated. He died at 39 years of age. Dr. King was assassinated by James Earl Ray, who would be caught and sent to prison later that year. On Dr. King's tombstone, it says, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty I'm Free at last."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great man. He motivated people. He helped influence the future. He saved and changed lives. He helped pave a path to many people's freedom. He changed the wrong laws to better ones. He changed the world, just one step at a time.

Getting a Fun Dog

By Kameron Brink

I was practicing dirt bike lessons every hot day in the summer in full gear. We had just moved into our new house in the country. The summer days were so hot all the time. I would get super hot, so I would take a lot of water breaks. Riding my dirt bike allowed me to think about different things. I started thinking about a new dog and how fun it would be to have a new dog. I told my parents we should get a puppy, they thought it was a good idea. I loved the idea of a puppy. That night I couldn't stop dreaming about a new dog. If my parents got it, I would be so happy. Getting a puppy was all I could think about and every time my parents asked me a question, I would answer with something about a new dog.

My dad said, "What do you want for lunch?"

I said, "A dog."

My Mom would say, "Get ready for bed."

I would respond with, "Get ready for a new dog."

My sister told me to stop asking her to play hockey and I would say, "If I had a dog, I wouldn't ask you to play with me."

I couldn't get it out of my head! I wanted to get a dog so bad! I just needed one and I wanted it to be a girl. She would be the smartest little dog ever! I promised to take care of her and teach her different tricks. I promised to feed her, give her water, let her out to go to the bathroom and give her baths when she got dirty.

We had a family meeting about getting a new dog. We talked about how much work it would be to get a new puppy. Everyone agreed that we would help out. But now we had to find the perfect dog for our family. We talked about our old dog Jaeger who was a great hunting dog but was super crazy and couldn't always settle down. We knew we didn't want a German wire hair for that reason. We also knew we needed to get a dog that would get along with our little dog Bella. Our cousins had a chocolate lab named Stella and we loved her because she is so mellow, sweet and a loving dog. So, we thought we would get a chocolate lab.

One night my mom was on Facebook and she saw a breeder named Momma Mia with a litter of 10 puppies. They were the cutest thing I have ever seen in my whole life. There were five boys and five girls. We paid most attention to the girl puppy photos because we wanted a girl. They were really small with big blue eyes, floppy ears, no teeth and had small noses. We found the cutest puppy out of all of them. The family thought we would get that one.

My mom texted the owner, Sandy, and asked if we could see the puppy the next day in the afternoon. The next day Sandy came, and she surprised us by bringing six puppies. We played with all the puppies and they were so funny and small. The puppies would follow me around and would chew on my fingers. We all agreed that we liked the puppy with the light pink collar. It was hard to see them go because they were so cute and cuddly. Mom told me that I had to wait six weeks for the new puppy to come home with us.

We tried to come up with what we thought would be the best name for our pup. When we looked outside our house there was a dog in the yard, and we tried to get its attention by saying different names. The dog answered to Jason which is my Dad's best friend's name. We thought it would be funny to call her something closed to Jason but since it is a girl, we all agreed with Jacy.

We went to a pet store named Pet Authority to buy some new things for our puppy. We bought dog bowls, chew toys, treats, bones, a dog bed and a leash. Our family was ready for the new family member.

Yay, Jacy the puppy was finally here! Sandy dropped her off on a Sunday morning. We spent the day playing and getting to know her. We brought Jacy in the house. She and our other dog were friends at first sight. She slept a lot and peed a lot and didn't care where she did it.

The first night for Jacy was really rough. She was moaning and crying all night long. We would let her out in the middle of the night, but we knew we had to put her back in the kennel to train her that this was going to be her new life. Each night she got better and didn't miss her original puppy family as much. My Dad and I worked with her on catching and retrieving balls. We threw the ball and she chased it but when we called her name, she didn't bring the toy back. We wanted her to learn because we wanted her to be a hunting dog.

I didn't realize how much work it was to have a new puppy. We had to keep close watch on her. She would pee all over! But she got better and better every day. This was an important skill to be inside the house, so we had to keep the doors closed and take the rugs out of the house. We had to put our shoes away and we had to put stuff where she couldn't reach it. She destroyed my foam knee hockey balls, my sister's shoes and would steal socks from the laundry basket when my Mom was doing laundry.

Jacy and Bella would play and then it would become a fight over a bone whenever the other dog got it. As she grew, we had to make sure that our food was in a safe spot where our dog wouldn't get it. There were times when someone would walk away and she would jump on the table and started eating the food. It made everyone mad because they didn't like it when she jumped on the table and ate their food.

Fall started to end, and snow started to fall. Our dogs loved to play in the snow, and it was Jacy's first winter, so she loved it the most. She dug her nose into the snow and would throw the snow up in the air when she lifted her head up. She liked to run in the deep snow, and it looked like a deer running in a field. I would throw snowballs at her and she would jump on me and make me fall into the snow.

The snow started to melt, and I thought that she was not feeling the same because she liked to play in the snow. I think that without the snow it's easier to play fetch because she could find the ball easier on the grass than in the snow. She got better and fetched the ball so my dad bought a ball thrower that would throw the ball farther so she could run farther to get the ball.

My dad looked into different training places and he found the one that he thought would be best. My dad and sister went to drop her off and I wasn't able to go because I was at school and I was kind of bummed about that. She was at the training for two long weeks.

My dad, sister and I went to pick her up. We were so excited to see her again. We went there and the trainer said, "We are going to show you guys something she learned." The trainer brought her out in a kennel on a trailer that was pulled by a four-wheeler and I could hear her barking. The trainer put her on a leash and then they threw a real bird, and the trainer shot a gun and she retrieved it to the guy's hand. It was fun seeing the things that she had learned.

The trainer said we had a good hunting dog and my family and I were happy about that. Jacy was not scared of the boom from the gun either. Jacy came home and was so excited to be home and we took her out and played fetch. The trainer told us to fetch only about three or four times, or she will get sick of it. So, we fetched about four times and had her take a bath because she was in the kennel for a while and smelled like dead ducks.

In June she will be leaving again for 10 weeks to the same training place. She will learn how to be off a leash without running away. She will also learn how to be a good house dog and not jump on people when they come into our house. My family has to learn the sayings like sit and stay and others that they use. We are going to be able to watch them pheasant hunt on land and a duck hunt on water.

There are going to be so many different things to do with her when she is fully trained. We will be

able to hunt with her. We will be able to play with each other and we will be able to run around the yard together. I hope my mom and dad will let her sleep in my bed with me.

There are so many different things that I've learned in the time of owning a puppy. It's not easy at the beginning but it gets better and better. Jacy is growing to be a big part of our family and we are so lucky to have her as our own.

When I'm in school I miss her, and wonder what she is doing and thinking about. Is she waiting for me to come home and play with her or is she thinking about wrestling my other dog? Maybe she is happy when I come home so she can go potty. If I could speak dog, I wonder what would we would talk about? I would have so many questions for her. I think our first conversation would be like this:

"Jacy, why do I walk on two legs and you walk on four?"

"So I can run faster than you."

"What is your favorite toy? Mine is a RC car," I'd say.

"My favorite toy is my Kong when it has peanut butter in it, otherwise it is my ball," Jacy would answer.

"Do you get sick of eating the same thing over and over every day?"

"Yes, would you mind throwing me some extra table food during supper?"

"Do you like to get dirty?"

"Yes, but I hate baths!"

"Do you love Bella?"

"Um, yes except when that little dog hurts me."

I guess I'll just have to dream about our conversations because I don't think she will be able to talk to me.

Someday my dream hunt with her will be to go to South Dakota with my dad to go duck hunting. We will camp in our camper on shore. We will get up early and get our waders on and Jacy will have a life jacket on. We will get in the boat and go to a spot and set up. Then we will wait for the time that we can start shooting. Then the ducks would start swarming into the decoys. My dad and I would start dropping ducks left and right. I would get the left; my dad would get the right. Jacy would be trained to jump off the boat into the water and start retrieving ducks. For each one she brought me I would give her a treat. Hopefully she will keep going for more.

I know dogs don't live a long time. So, I am grateful that we got her now and can enjoy her for as long as we can. I think we got lucky to have Jacy in our family that she's lucky to have a family that loves her and cares about her like we do. We get to experience a lot of good times and make many memories with her. I have learned so much in the short time she's been with us.

Life's Defining Moments

By Claire Elness

People like to believe that life is made up of one “once-in-a-lifetime” moment, your “fifteen minutes of fame” if you will, and that everything else is either leading you up to said moment, or the result of it. I can't say I agree, mainly because in only my 14 years of life so far, I've already experienced multiple “life-defining” moments. What exactly would I classify as “life-defining?” I'd say something that leaves a resounding impression on me, even after it has happened. I have collected a few of my most defining moments to share with you. These represent three important lessons that I have learned: that life is what you make of it, that it is important to see the world through different eyes, and that being kind to others always pays off.

I think I'd like to start with the scariest, and possibly the worst moment of my life. It was September 19, 2018. I had just started sixth grade. It was a Thursday, which meant I had dance that day. My step-dad had brought me home and we were just about to have supper. I hadn't even changed out of my leotard yet. It had been raining when we got home, but I didn't think much of it. Rain isn't much of an anomaly, after all.

All of a sudden, storm sirens went off and my parents got tornado warnings on their phones. My sister was taking a bath, so she scrambled into her clothes and ran downstairs with the rest of us. At first, we didn't think that it would be that bad since we heard storm sirens fairly often. We went outside to look at the funky-looking clouds. That was kind of cool. However, when the wind and rain started to pick up, we went inside.

We turned on the TV in an attempt to watch the weather, but it was to no avail, since we'd hardly turned it on when the power went out. At this point my sister and I were fairly nervous, since the power didn't go out all that often. My mom and step-dad were upstairs, looking at the sky and clouds still, but my sister and I were getting more and more scared, so we told them to come downstairs with us. My sister started to cry at one point, so I tried to calm her down by telling her a joke I had heard recently. I could tell that she tried to laugh, but I was also getting more and more freaked out, so we both just kind of hugged each other and tried to think about other things.

A couple minutes later, both of the adults yelled and ran down the stairs. This completely terrified us, so we started sobbing even more. At this point, the wind was so loud we couldn't even hear each other talk. There was hail, and we could hear trees falling and at that point I thought, “I might die tonight.” Scary, I know. I'm not the type of person to think that too often, but I'd never been through a storm that bad in my whole life, and I knew that tornadoes were nothing to take lightly.

Afterwards, I found out that Mom had heard what sounded like a train, and that was why she and my step-dad came downstairs so suddenly. She had heard once that a tornado sounds like a train when it's close to you. For a few moments we stayed there, in the family room. I knew from school drills and such that you were supposed to stay away from windows. Well, we live in a split-level house, and we don't really have a basement, so I was even more scared that the windows were going to break any moment.

But then, just as suddenly as it had started, it was over. I could hear again, just as soon as my ears stopped ringing, of course. I started crying again, and laughing, even though we were okay. I was less happy, however, when I stepped outside and saw the mess of power lines and downed trees tangled up on the road and yards. It was terrible.

All of our neighbors were outside, but Mom told us we weren't allowed to step outside the driveway

because the power lines might still have some power left, and she didn't want us to get electrocuted (thanks, Mom).

I ended up staying at my grandparents' house out in the country for the next few days until the mess had been mostly cleaned up and the power restored. To this day, the memory still scares me, and I think about how lucky I am that we don't live somewhere where tornadoes or hurricanes or other severe storms happen very often. I think what defined this moment as such an impacting one was not necessarily that it scared me so much, although that definitely plays a part, but the fact that it made me think so much about people who have to go through that often, and it made me more grateful. It gave me a different outlook on life, which was that things could always get worse, yes, but life is what you make of it. If you want to see the glass as half-empty, you do that. If you see it as half-full, that's also valid.

I try my best to see the glass exactly as it is, half-full and half-empty. It is just as important to see the problems or things that are making you unhappy as it is to see the positive. If you understand what is making you sad or angry, then you can fix it, and you're one step closer to filling up your glass.

The second life-defining moment is sort of a few all bunched into the same thing. When I was 10, in June of 2017, my first little brother was born. Now, I had a younger sister, but she was only two years younger than me, and I didn't really remember when she was a baby. She was also my only full sister, since the new baby was a half-brother, as we had different moms. However, when this new little boy was put in my arms for the first time, it was love at first sight. I loved him, and I held him any time I could. I'd talk to him, I'd read to him, and I'd feed him. As soon as he was old enough to point his finger, he'd make my sister pick up the food he dropped on the floor. We all found that funny.

I got to watch as he learned to crawl and eventually to walk, as his obsession with trains got bigger and bigger, and as his personality developed with each time I saw him. You can imagine that I was overjoyed when, a little while later, I found out that I was going to have another sibling. I was excited for this baby, too.

In July of 2019 my second little brother was born. He was more mellow than his older brother, but I hear that's common in second-born kids. He seemed to like me more than my sister, which pleased me very much. I loved carrying the new baby around and rocking him to sleep whenever I could. And, of course, changing diapers all the time! The older of the two has started calling my sister and me his girls, so in that fashion, I call them my boys. I love my boys very much. Just being able to see them makes me happy.

It's amazing how much they've grown and developed in just a few years. I think that is the reason that I consider these life-defining moments. The fact that I witnessed these two little babies grow into two little people and develop personalities along the way is something that I am very grateful for.

Being around little kids is something that I love. You get to hear their different perspectives on life and listen to them talk about their life and the things they find interesting. It makes you see the world a little differently. That's an important life lesson, I believe. Always keep your mind open to different perspectives and try to see the world through other people's eyes, especially those of a young child's. It will make you appreciate what you've been given even more.

The third moment that I have thought of is really more a standard that I live by that has paid off every day of my life. You all know the Golden Rule, "Treat others the way you want to be treated." I try my best to live by this every day, and it is really something that works. At the end of class every day I say thank you, bye or have a good day/weekend. I try to let my teachers know that I appreciate them. I also thank people when they do something nice, such as holding the door open, or picking up something that I dropped. Being an agreeable person in general is something that makes people like you more. I honestly believe that the nicer you are to other people, the nicer they'll be to you. I sure would be more inclined to be kind to someone who has previously been nice to me or someone else than to someone who hasn't. This is not me telling you that you have to like every person in the world, or agree with them, but being

polite and kind is something that will always pay off. I'd say that every time someone is nice to me is a life-defining moment, because it makes me happy and therefore more inclined to be kind to other people, which shapes both my life and theirs.

In the end, life is full of defining moments and opportunities. Each moment shapes and defines your life, and you as a person. Three of the most important life lessons, in my opinion, would be that life is what you make of it, it's important to see through different perspectives, and to treat others the way you want to be treated. Living by these three standards will not only help you be a happier person, but you'll be able to help others and make their lives better. After all, if life is a glass of water, you are the faucet. You have the ability to make life better.

My Most Defining Moment

By Elyzah Erickson

The theme of this contest was defining moments. A defining moment is a significant event or decision that influences the future. It could be a personal or a larger historical event. My first thought was to write about the coronavirus, it is such a major part of my and everyone else's life! But as I was writing about my experience with the coronavirus it felt weird and too clichéd. The coronavirus is an experience everyone shared. Most people will be writing about it because they went through the same things – the masks, the lockdowns, the tests! So, I decided I would write a story about something nobody else can write about because this is my story. Here it is MY most defining moment.

I should probably start at the beginning. Ever since I was young my grandparents have had horses and I loved them. I loved riding them, grooming them and just being around them. I was six years old when we got Pete and Antonio. They were Shetland pony brothers and were for all the kids in the family. It was very fun having them. But like I said, they were only part mine. I know I was lucky to even have a horse in the family, most people don't even get that. But I wanted a personal connection with a horse, something more than just a type of transportation. A couple of months later we had to sell them because we couldn't afford them while also having my grandma and aunt's horses.

I was nine years old when we got our next family horse. As I expressed before, I wasn't a huge fan of that. Again, I may sound spoiled, but I wanted a horse I could truly call my own. Luna was a very good horse but unlike how I'd hoped, we didn't have a personal connection. We were more like acquaintances. Roughly a month into owning Luna she started to act up, bucking when you got on her. We assumed it was a behavioral issue so we sent her to a trainer only for them to tell us they couldn't help her. After that, we found out she had developed back problems, so we retired Luna to a pasture. About a month later my grandma sold her. I was very sad to see her go even though we didn't have long to get to know each other.

That winter my grandmother showed me a picture of a horse somebody she knew was selling. He wasn't exactly the most beautiful horse in the world, he was a POA (Pony of America) so he was short, he barely had any mane or tail, and he had patches of fur missing around his eyes. I wasn't quick to judge. I told my grandma I would be interested in looking at him, but she shrugged it off. I just assumed maybe he was sold to someone else, or they decided against it.

By summer I started to lose hope that there was any chance we would get another horse. But one day my mom told me I needed to go out to the barn and see something. I walked out to the barn and there wasn't anyone there. I peered around to the side of the barn and there in the round pen was the horse from the photo! I ran up to greet him and he was very friendly.

My grandma was there and so was a man I have never met before. (The horse's owner I assumed.) The man turned to me and asked if I would like to ride him. I looked at my grandma and she nodded. I felt relaxed the second I put my foot in the stirrup. He wasn't strong and powerful, but he was sweet. Later I learned that his name was Blaze. He was six years old, and it turns out my grandma got him for me. Not my brother, not my cousins, just for me.

Today is Thursday, March 18, 2021. I have had Blaze for three years. He is my partner, he is my teammate, he is my best friend and I love him more than anything. So that is my story, a story that no one else can write. That was my most defining moment.

My Diabetes Story

By Emerson Garry

Hello, my name is Emerson Garry and today I'm going to be telling you my story of diabetes. The day started pretty normal. I woke up and got ready. My entire family was already downstairs eating breakfast. My mom told me just the other day that I was going to go to the clinic just to be asked a couple questions since my parents were convinced there was something wrong with me because I was constantly drinking water and going to the bathroom. I also lacked energy. I asked my parents repeatedly if there were going to be shots because I hate shots. They said no but I didn't really believe them because they were being very quiet. We dropped my siblings off at school and then drove to the clinic.

Once we arrived at the clinic, I went to sit in the waiting room with my parents. After a while they called me back into the room. I sat in a chair and a nice-looking lady sat across from me and my family. She started asking me random questions like if I had been going to the bathroom a lot and drinking a lot of water. I downgraded it a lot more than what was actually happening because I was afraid there was something wrong with me.

After we were done talking, she told us to go wait in another room because I was going to have to get some blood drawn. I was so angry because I did not know that I would have to get blood drawn. I waited with my dad sitting next to me and my fear built up. Finally, a lady called us back and I sat in a chair while they found my vein and took some blood. It hurt a lot, but it was over after a little bit. After blood was drawn, I was free to go so I left and got dropped off at school. The day continued to be very normal until about lunch time.

My teacher told me that I was going to be leaving school early so I packed up my things and went to my car. My parents didn't really tell me anything but just kept driving and said that we were going someplace. We stopped at the gas station to get me an apple so I could have something to eat. I noticed bags in the back seat, so I asked where we were going.

My parents told me we were going to the hospital and that I was going to stay overnight there. They said it was going to be fun. I did not worry too much on the way there. Once we arrived, we signed in and they checked my pulse and my blood pressure. Then my dad left the room to go get some supplies and I found out that my grandma was there. Soon they led me into a room in the ER and a lady came in to deliver some sad news. She said that I had Type 1 diabetes. My mom started to cry and I felt horrible.

I did not exactly know what Type 1 diabetes was, so the lady explained it to me. She said that there's something inside my body called the pancreas and it breaks down carbs that you eat and turns them into energy. My pancreas does not work anymore. She said that the blood test was there to check my A1C. A normal kid my age has an A1C about five. Mine was 18, the highest they've ever seen someone have. She also said there's no cure and diabetes will be with me for the rest of my life.

After a little bit, they moved me to a different room where I would be spending the night. I did not get to eat that whole night and I was starving. Sleep was pretty bad because I had to wake up every hour. In the morning I finally got to have breakfast. I ordered tons of food from the menu that they'd given me. There was a TV in my room and I got to watch shows on it. One of the bad parts was that I had to get three IVs in my arm that hurt a lot whenever I moved. That night my dad got us all Chick-fil-A and then I was discharged after just one day.

During that day, I got to FaceTime my sisters at home and got some gifts from friends and family.

The drive home was very bittersweet and I asked a ton of questions. Once I got home my aunt was there waiting for me since she was watching my younger siblings. It was great to be home.

For this last bit I want to share some facts about diabetes. First of all, it is not contagious and anyone can get it. There are two types of diabetes Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 happens usually when you're a child and affects you for the rest of your life. When you get Type 1 diabetes your pancreas completely shuts down. When you get Type 2 diabetes you usually get it in your adult life from eating too much sugar. I did not get Type 1 diabetes from eating too much sugar. Since my pancreas does not produce insulin, a form of energy, I have to have shots whenever I eat and those shots distribute insulin into my body. I can still play and have fun. It has been a year-and-a-half since that day on 9/9/19 and I have grown a lot since then. And that is my story.

The Accidental Accident

Andree Jakovich

It all started out one day, like any other day. We were driving to my grandparents' house in Grand Rapids for my brother's hockey tournament in Breezy Point. It felt like a long time until we would arrive in Grand Rapids. Deep down in my stomach I knew that it took five hours to get there. It took even longer because my sister, Sasha, just had her concussion two months earlier and she was still recovering. Once in a while my mom would pull over, and Sasha would come out of the car to clear her dizzy head. I was just about to throw up when my dad said that we were in Grand Rapids.

I was so relieved! Grand Rapids, here we come! I could tell my brother, Marco, was excited too. His long messy brown hair was sticking up, and he was grinning. Unlike Sasha, who was frowning since she did not want to come in the first place! Not just because of her concussion, also because she is the oldest. She is 14, and that's when you start acting like a spoiled brat, which my mom calls a teenager. She doesn't get out of her bed in the morning, my mom constantly keeps telling her to open her curtains in her room, she locks herself in the bathroom for a half an hour which I wouldn't mind if I didn't share a bathroom with her, and she is always on her phone, which makes everything worse with her concussion.

As a matter of fact, last month, I went in the bathroom to brush my teeth before bed and Sasha yelled "April Fools!" Sasha had put hand sanitizer on the toilet seat. The weirdest thing is that it was November. That night when everyone was sleeping, my sister yelled, "Ouch!" I ran into the bathroom only to find Sasha. She had just sat on the toilet seat, which she had put hand sanitizer on, a few hours ago!

At last, we finally pulled up in our grandparents' driveway. I quickly ran to their house and I hugged my grandma and grandpa. Sasha and Marco did the same. Then we all went into our rooms to unpack all of our stuff. Sasha has her own bedroom. Her bedroom is sky blue, with flowered wallpaper. Marco and I share a bedroom. It is just plain white, with lots of old photos, and an old, off tune piano.

When I finished unpacking, I brushed my teeth and jumped straight to bed. I slept on the floor, but Marco got an actual bed. I tried to fall asleep but it was hard with Marco there. He just would not stop making noises!

Just then, my dad came into the room and said, "If you don't stop making noises, you will have to do dishes for the next year." My dad always goes over the top with punishments.

Sometimes, I wish Marco would act less like an animal, and more like a human being. Also, he looks like Pig-Pen in Charlie Brown. I finally got to sleep at around 11:30 p.m.

I slept well, even though something was wrong. I could not seem to figure it out. The next thing I knew, I was sitting on my mom's lap in a waiting room. At first, I didn't know where we were. Then I spotted a big sign that read EMERGENCY ROOM in big red capital letters.

A few minutes later, a nurse brought me and my mother to a room. When we got to the room, I asked my mom why I was in the emergency room. She said that I had a seizure. I was just about to ask her what a seizure was, but I held all my thoughts in my head because just then a nurse came in with a very long needle. She poked me! To tell you the truth, initially it did not seem that bad, I thought, but afterwards my arm felt very sore and I became glum.

Then, the nurse tested my blood pressure. Eventually, we left the hospital and got into the car. My grandpa was in the passenger seat. As we drove away, my mom explained what happened. She said that at about 7 a.m., she got woken by Marco. He said that something was wrong with me. He also said that I was coughing up white foam and choking. When my mom checked on me, we immediately left for the

emergency room. Good thing my grandpa had been woken up by all that commotion, so he offered to drive us since I was unconscious and my mom needed to hold me.

Soon, we arrived back at our grandparents' house. My grandma was making pancakes. I finally felt like myself again and I ate with my family. My brother kept on talking about what just happened. We left my grandparents' house and continued to Breezy Point, our final destination. Now, this time, I did not mind having to stop for Sasha, because I felt dizzy from the driving too! Ultimately, I thought the trip was awesome even with the accidental accident!

The Impossible Pet

By Marco Jakovich

My rabbit, Sylvia, turned out to be a perfect pet. Sylvia plays in my backyard with my sisters and me. She goes camping along with my family. She lets others hold her without scratching them. Sylvia lets people pet her, and she snuggles and grooms our guinea pig, Delby. If you are thinking that she was always perfect, think again. She had a brutal past.

It all started one day when I was in my dad's black Chevy, driving to a farm. In the car my two sisters, Andree and Sasha, sat beside me, along with my dad at the wheel. At the farm, there was a family, two dogs and a rabbit.

The rabbit was in a very small cage and could not move around much. The family called the rabbit Bun Bun. The family said that she was abandoned and she needed a better place to live. They also said that someone had Bun Bun but she ran away somehow. The family found the rabbit in the wild and took her as a pet. We put the rabbit cage in our car and drove away.

In the car on the way home, I stuck my fingers through the bars of the cage, to pet Bun Bun. Her black and white fur was so soft! I thought we needed to rename her.

"We should name her Moonlight," I told my sisters, since she was black and white.

My sister, Sasha, said no. A few minutes later, she thought of the best name for our new rabbit. The name was Sylvia. Everyone in our family loved it. Her new name was Sylvia Moonlight.

Once we arrived at our house, we realized that Sylvia was not the best pet. Her attitude was horrible. Sylvia would run away every chance she got, she would scratch you when you tried to hold her, she would flip over her food dish and litter, and she would chew your shoes.

Years passed by. She still did not change her attitude. My family tried everything to tame her. She never changed until she met our guinea pig, Delby, who was afraid of everything. Delby and Sylvia somehow created a bond. Sylvia would groom him, Delby would snuggle with Sylvia, and they would sleep with each other.

Soon enough, Delby and Sylvia would treat my family like they treated each other. Delby was not scared of everything, and Sylvia would run away less often. When she did, she always came back after a few minutes. Sylvia would let you pet her and hold her, and she would never scratch or bite.

How this happened, no one was sure, but I think that if you treat anyone good, they will treat you good too! Delby treated Sylvia good, and Sylvia treated him good in return. You can treat people how you want to be treated too!

When Life Does Not Go Right, Go Left

By Sasha Jakovich

I never knew how much my mother meant to me until it was almost too late. My mom cooked for me, cleaned for me, drove me everywhere and she did all that with barely anything in return. She was like a personal servant. I didn't realize how my mother impacted my life until she ended up in the hospital.

It was a regular Friday in February 2020. There was a bug going around in my family. My brother had thrown up the day before and everyone felt unpleasant. Because of this, we did a movie night and connected it to a projector on a wall. About 15 minutes into the movie, my mom went upstairs for a bit. She came back downstairs and told us that she wasn't feeling well and that she was going to take a cold bath. My dad came home from work shortly after.

As soon as the movie finished, we had to go to bed since it was late. When I woke up the next morning, it was as if my mother and father vanished in thin air. A quick phone call later, I found out that they were in the hospital. My dad told me that 95% of my mom's lungs were shot. They were infected with pneumonia. He also said that since mom had asthma, her health was getting worse rapidly. When my dad came home, he did not say much of anything except that my mom was extremely sick, and we could not see her which made me disappointed.

A couple of days later, I was able to FaceTime my mother and she looked like something from outer space. She was full of IVs and bruises. There were huge circles under her eyes giving the effect that she had been sleep-deprived for a year! It was really scary to see my mom like that since she wasn't her cheery self.

"How's everything been at home?" She asked me.

I replied, "Okay I guess, though when will you come home?"

"I think," said my mother, "That I might be here a while."

"Oh, hopefully you will come home soon," I mumbled.

Everything felt out of place. Things were different without my mom. First of all, the house slowly turned into a mess. People were not cleaning up after themselves and it was starting to get overwhelming. Also, my dad was not always available to drive me places so I either had to get a ride from a friend, miss the activity or go old-fashioned and use my bike. At least I would play games online with my mother from time to time.

After what seemed like years, my mother finally came home! I couldn't wait to see her. It was absolutely not what I expected. I thought that if you were out of the hospital, you would magically be healed. That was not the case. She stumbled in with an oxygen tank and the whole mood of the house shifted. She mostly slept, and when she was awake, she didn't do much of anything. Slowly, she got better but she still wasn't back to normal.

My family had planned a trip to SeaWorld, Busch Gardens and Aquatica in Florida months ago. We would go to SeaWorld the first day, then Aquatica the next and Busch Gardens the last. My dad took days off from work and everything. We were scheduled to fly to Florida on the last day of March. Since my mother just came back from the hospital, there was lots of debate on what to do. My dad wanted to cancel the trip, my sister and brother wanted to go without her, my Mom wanted to come with us and I wanted to go with my mother but still wanted her to get better. Andree, my little eight-year-old sister, found a website called www.monkeyhelpers.org. Her idea was that she would buy a monkey and it would help my mother while we went to Florida.

My mother had always been a stubborn woman, and she persisted to tell us that she was fine to go. She decided to come in a wheelchair with us since pneumonia affected her lungs and she couldn't breathe if she did too much walking. The vacation was finally here and we drove to the airport. That was when I realized how annoying it was to haul around a wheelchair! First of all, the wheelchair had a mind of its own and it would never obey your orders despite your best efforts. Second, there were the looks of judgment from those passing by. They would either glance and avert their eyes or just stare. It made me extremely uncomfortable. Lastly, you would be surprised at how few wheelchair ramps there were in an airport! We had to walk around aimlessly for hours trying to figure out how to avoid stairs.

At least we were going to Sea World the next day! I was jumping up and down with excitement. I couldn't wait to go to Sea World! It would entail rides as far as the eye could see, shows every hour differing from dolphins to turtles and numerous exhibits of exotic animals! It was like a dream come true! Aquatica and Busch Gardens looked incredible too! The next few days passed in a blur and before we knew it, our departure from Florida was approaching. Once back home, everyone stayed positive even though life was still rough. My mother eventually continued to get better, and everything slowly went back to normal.

I was so grateful that I was able to have a positive experience despite my mother's temporary disability. Luckily, she does not use a wheelchair or an oxygen tank anymore. Not everyone is that blessed. I will remember that life lesson. Keeping a positive outlook in a midst of a negative situation is the best thing you can do. Hence, a new law of life!

Muskeg and Me

By Helen Kliewer

Muskeg can teach you a great deal about yourself. The moss, trees and other debris in the water make it extraordinarily difficult to paddle a canoe in muskeg. You can't walk on it either. While muskeg may look stable, as soon as you step out of the canoe, your foot will sink through and into the swamp water below.

It was day 21 on trail in the remote Canadian wilderness. The five of us awoke, packed up camp, and our two canoes were on the water not more than an hour after sunrise. I had met my companions, three other teenage girls and one camp counselor, just before the trip began. Today, we were meant to paddle a river, but we saw no river, only muskeg and a small winding path, barely two feet wide through the weeds. Is this the way? Nobody knew, but there was no other way. We pushed forward.

The muskeg only got thicker and the water levels fell. It was very hot and it smelled like rotten eggs. Mosquitos swarmed around us. Logs lined the bottom of our narrow waterway and our canoes kept getting stuck. With paddling useless, we had three ways through the muskeg. The first was a coordinated effort of pushing our paddles against the reeds and using our feet to push against the logs. The second was me repeatedly getting out of the canoe, chest deep in the muck, and pulling my partner in the canoe through the mud. The third was the both of us getting out of the boat and lifting our heavy canoe over the many beaver dams. The hours dragged on. Our group was getting tired and everyone was frustrated.

We finally reached the portage. Looking up the trail, we saw a steep hill. The previous day's rain turned the dirt to mud and made the many rocks slippery. We were all exhausted and nobody wanted to carry our wooden canoe up this climb. Nobody wanted to, but somebody had to, so I did. It was exhausting and my arms were shaking the whole time, but somebody had to do it. Every step I recited the words from my favorite children's book, "The Little Engine That Could." A book I have read more than 100 times to kids in the nursery at church. "I think I can. I think I can," over and over in my head. Eventually, I reached the other side and instead of seeing a lake or real river like we had all hoped, there was only more muskeg.

We pushed on. The hours felt like days. We had been on the water for more than 14 hours. The sun went down and the light was fading. In a valley with dense trees, there was no good place to camp.

My counselor sent me out to find a spot for the tent. The only spot I could find large enough to fit our tent was over a quarter mile away, up the hill. I made over six trips up that hill, hauling our gear, every time in the dark climbing over trees the beaver had felled.

We set up the tent in the dark with our headlamps as the bugs swarmed. It was too late to start the camp stove to make dinner. I got into our tent with the day's mud and grass from the muskeg still on my legs even though I did my best to wipe it off. We ate trail mix and fell asleep still hungry.

Physically and emotionally, this was the hardest day of my life. It was also one of the best. I learned that when hard things need to be done, I can do them. I don't give up. I'm a leader. I can't say that I like muskeg, but I am thankful for what it taught me about myself.

Glasses

By Gracie Larson

“Can you repeat the question please?” someone said. But I couldn’t figure out who because my eyes were unfocused.

“Sure, what is the correct answer to seven divided by 53?” Mrs. Gavle said to the class. I was relieved because I could still not see the board very well.

I was playing at recess when I accidentally kicked the soccer ball into someone’s leg. I didn’t know who it was or what I hit at the time, so I just ran to whoever I hit to say I’m sorry and that it was an accident. Luckily it was just my best friend, Stella, and she was playing soccer too. I just didn’t know it was her.

That day after school I told my mom what happened. After the next week or so of struggling, I had an appointment to get my glasses. We ordered the glasses as soon as we could, and we then went to the glasses place to pick them up soon after.

One of the glasses ladies said, “If your glasses are not on your face, they belong in your case.” That helps me remember to keep my glasses safe.

I need glasses to see things from far away like the board, TV, people and so many more things. Glasses help me see and I need them to see. Before glasses most things looked blurry and fuzzy. After, things look so clear and clean.

Pathway to Grief

By Greta Luskey

“Why? Why? Why to Braden? Why to him? What did he do to deserve this?” my mind screams in anger at the information shared with me. Tears well in my eyes while contemplating the viciously, ugly word of cancer!

Looking back at my life, I have lost someone I care about the most: my cousin. I believe that the people I care about the most are taken from me too soon. My built-in best friend and the brother I never had was taken from my family and me right before our eyes.

I remember leaving school early. It was a sunny day and my teacher got a call and she said, “Greta, please pack your bag and you may go to your mom’s classroom.”

I walked down to my mom’s classroom and she said we are going to your cousin’s. As confused as I was, I only remember Braden being sick in the hospital a couple nights before.

The car was silent until my mom said, “Braden is very sick and is dying.” My heart sank and my brain was going everywhere and thinking like crazy, “Why is this happening? Why to Braden?”

Walking up to my aunt and uncle’s door felt like walking in a desert, scared to walk in knowing this was the last time I would see him. As soon as we walked in, my family was all sitting there. Most people were upstairs with Braden. My grandma gave me a hug right when I walked in.

We walked upstairs only to see Braden laying on the bed. The only thing I remember my aunt saying to me is, “He isn’t sleeping and his eyes are just like that. He can still see and hear you.”

I walked over to Braden and said my last goodbyes. Braden responded with, “Goodbye, I love you.”

I walked back downstairs to everyone else because it was time to bring Braden to the hospital. Everyone else just waited at my aunt and uncle’s house. Kristin, Braden’s mom, texted us and said we could go home because they were staying overnight at the Ronald McDonald house. (Today, all elementary schools of New Prague collect pop tabs for families like Braden’s to stay at the hospital while their child is sick at the hospital.) It was pretty late when we got home, I tried to fall asleep but I couldn’t, knowing that I had an angel watching over me now.

The next day I found out I got to skip a couple days of school, because of the wake and funeral. The cars for the funeral were lined up miles down the road and the cars wouldn’t stop coming. In spite of the funeral being long, my family was there to make everything better. Going back to school after that was weird and was slowly drifting away minute by minute. Although I had some therapy dogs, with a teacher named Mrs. Hennen, nothing could fix the fact that Braden was gone. She helped me tremendously, along with my cousins.

Family gatherings didn’t feel normal and still never will. It was actually what stopped that felt abnormal such as not hearing his laugh, not going to the hospital, and not skipping religion to go to a hockey game. I’ve come to realize, I miss the “nots.”

My cousins and I went to a day camp called Camp Oz. It’s a camp for kids to go for losing a close one. It has many activities throughout the day and also time for talking about our loved ones. We go every year now for Braden. We also go to Wisconsin to a place called Faith’s Lodge where your whole family can stay for a couple days. For example, it’s like a hotel, but not. It has many rooms, rooms for families to sleep in, a library and a movie room. It has four levels. It’s a place my family and I go each year for Braden. The rooms also have names for little kids who have also passed.

We also get t-shirts for Braden each year. We do all this just to feel his presence. Just because he had

to go doesn't mean he still isn't with me. Looking back, I have lost the people I care about the most, but they will always have a special place in my heart and will always stick with me. Did cancer win in this situation? Yes, but not to my family. We stuck with Braden through his rough times and tried to make them better, no matter the pain. We still celebrate Braden and live through his presence.

Defining Moments Today

By Grace MacPherson

When bad things happen, they result in one of two things: people grow stronger or people grow weaker. Over the course of the last year, we as a nation have struggled through the COVID-19 pandemic. The question then rises, will we, as individuals and as a nation, be made stronger or weaker by this?

I hope and pray that this struggle will strengthen our faith, relationships and patriotism. But it seems like the opposite is happening. Churches have closed, and those that have reopened still restrict attendance to comply with state and city mandates. Many people have not seen their family or friends for months, and those who live alone might go without speaking to someone else for days. Protesters tear down statues of men who fought against slavery – all in the name of justice and equality.

In the meantime, governors are wielding their emergency powers for times not permitted by state constitutions. Lawsuit after lawsuit has been brought against them, and while some cases have succeeded in restoring freedom to the American people, far more have failed.

It's up to us to decide, both as individuals and as a nation, whether we will let the pandemic and everything that comes with it weaken us, or whether we will be made stronger by it? Right now, things don't look promising. Americans are steadily losing their freedoms and hope is going with them. I pray that we will be able to triumph over tyranny and despair in this defining moment in American history and in the history of the world.

Camouflage

By Elijah Mons

The smell of pine filled my nostrils as adrenaline filled my veins. Dressed in green leaves and brown earth, I faded into nature. Even the leaves waved with envy. It was November in southern Minnesota and my first deer hunt that I would never forget.

The sun slowly faded, but my hope never ceased. When dusk arrived, snow came with it. As small snowflakes peacefully danced to the ground, the forest came alive. Squirrels chattered before a long winter, while blue jays and cardinals fluttered through the sky. Little chickadees called out through the forest and big geese honked a last goodbye.

A group of deer trotted through the field ahead. I looked through the scope of my crossbow. I waited for the deer to stop, took a deep breath, and pulled the trigger. The arrow went flowing at a rapid pace as if it were determined to reach the deer. Suddenly, the forest went silent. No birds singing, no squirrels chattering, no geese honking, nothing.

I looked to where the deer was and hoped I had hit it. But it just skipped gracefully into the brush. I had found the arrow a few feet before the deer. I had missed my shot. Feeling bummed, I walked back to my blind. That was my one chance, and I blew it.

The thicket began to rustle, as if to mock me. I continued to sit in my blind and wait. But soon the brush rustled more and what seemed to be mockery had turned into shaming. Then I heard footsteps; footsteps that sounded like music to my ears. Not human footsteps, but deer footsteps. I readied my crossbow and then saw the deer jump out of the thicket. I took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

The deer had been hit, weakly skipping into the thicket. We immediately began to track it. After about 15 minutes of searching, we found her, my very first deer. But the deer did not make the hunt so special to me. It was the time I spent with my grandfather that made it so extraordinary to me.

Getting a Puppy

By Charlie Nelson

Charlie was running through the neighborhood to his friend's house to see if they could have a nerf gun war. Charlie's friend's name was Anders. Anders was nine years old and had moved to the neighborhood about a year ago. He had a little brother named Dag and they had a golden retriever dog named Cody. Anders' mom's name was Jenny and his dad's name was Jen.

When Charlie got to Anders' house he knocked on the door. Anders opened it.

"Do you want to have a nerf gun war?" asked Charlie.

"Sure! I'll go grab my nerf guns," said Anders.

When they got back to Charlie's house, they started to pick bases. Anders picked the deck because he thought that it was better because it was higher and it had a railing so it would stop some of the foam bullets. Charlie picked the playset because it had many holes to shoot through and there were many places to escape.

"The rules are: headshots don't count, we each have five lives and you can't go in the other player's base," said Charlie.

"The battle begins in 3, 2, 1, go!" said Anders.

The two boys battled until they both had one life left. Anders was out of bullets and so was Charlie. They both left their bases and raced around the yard for bullets. They both managed to get back to their bases safely, but Anders still had to reload his gun. Charlie shot a bullet and it hit Anders in the leg.

"I won, I won," yelled Charlie.

"Good game," said Anders.

"You too," said Charlie. "What do you want to do now?" Charlie asked.

"How about knee hockey?" said Anders. Anders always liked playing this version of hockey. Anders was good at shooting the foam ball with a slap shot even though he was on his knees.

"Sure!" said Charlie.

They went to the garage to get the game set up. Charlie picked his favorite knee hockey stick. It was bright blue with dark red letters. Anders got a bright blue stick with white letters on it.

Once they set it up Charlie let Anders start with the ball. After a while the score was nine to nine and Charlie had the ball. He walked slowly towards Anders, stick-handling the ball. Then he faked left, went right and shot it upper left because Anders thought he was going to shoot right so he left the left side open.

After the game Anders said that he should probably go home for dinner. Charlie waved goodbye and walked toward his house.

When he got inside his dad asked him to come here. He flipped open his iPad and showed him an email. Charlie's jaw hit the floor, they were going to get a puppy!

"We are going to get a puppy!" screamed Evie, Charlie's little sister.

"We should start getting things ready for the puppy," said Mom.

"We need to pick out a name for the puppy," said Charlie.

"How about Koda?" asked Dad.

"I like it," said Mom.

"And so do I," said Charlie and Evie.

"Well then our dog's name will be Koda," said Mom.

To get ready for the puppy they had to block off the puzzle area, gate off the downstairs and entry way, set up the kennel, and gate off the music corner.

“Well, I think we are ready for the puppy to arrive,” said Mom.

When the big day came, there was a knock on the door. Charlie opened the door but he didn’t see anyone. Charlie was going to go outside to see what was going on but he tripped on a small brown box. Then the box moved a little bit. Charlie could hear scratching from inside the box, he called his dad from downstairs. Once his dad got down there Charlie opened the box and the puppy was looking at them. Puppy was here!

Koda was dark brown and about the size of a bowling pin. Charlie asked his dad, “What kind of dog is Koda again?”

“He is a Pudelpointer,” answered his dad.

The second we took him out of the box he started crying and scratching at the door. Charlie’s dad picked Koda up and held him in his arms. Once Koda stopped whining, his dad set him on the ground. Koda waddled towards the living room and right before he reached the two stairs that go down to the living room his legs went out from under him and he did the splits.

Dad had to pick him up so he could get back on his feet and then he fell forward and rolled down the stairs. He walked over to his new dog bed and fell asleep. Well, he fell asleep for about two seconds because Evie came down the stairs and saw Koda and ran to his bed to pick him up. Koda managed to squirm out of Evie’s arms and land on his feet.

Koda then saw the most amazing thing, it was a squeaky toy that looked like a hippo. Koda tried to run to the toy but instead of running, Koda hopped. Right before he got to the toy he tried to pounce on it but when he landed on the toy it squeaked. Koda got so scared that he ran the opposite way as fast as he could. But he forgot the stairs were there so he fell flat on his face. Charlie burst out laughing. In fact, he laughed so hard he fell off the couch.

“I think we have the funniest dog ever,” said Charlie.

“And the cutest,” said Evie.

“What kind of dog is Koda again?” asked Charlie.

I think it is pronounced a Pudelpointer,” said his dad.

I’ve never heard of that kind of dog,” said Charlie.

“It is a very rare kind of dog,” said Dad. “It is a hunting dog so when Koda gets older we will be able to hunt things like ducks and pheasants.”

“I want to go hunting,” said Charlie.

“You have to be a little bit older before you can go hunting with him,” said Dad.

Then Koda walked over to a corner of the house and turned around and charged at the couch. He tried to jump up on the couch. But he didn’t jump high enough so he bounced off the couch. The second time Koda tried to jump on the couch, Dad grabbed him before he hurt himself.

“Charlie, can you take the dog out please?” asked Mom.

“Sure!” said Charlie.

“Where is the leash for Koda?” asked Charlie

“I put it on top of Koda’s kennel.”

“Ok thanks.”

It was a nice day for a walk so Charlie walked Koda to the neighbors’ house and back. When they got back inside. Charlie sat on the couch and threw Koda’s toy across the living room and Koda ran for it and grabbed the toy but he couldn’t pick it up so he had to push it back to Charlie.

“Koda isn’t as good as the other dogs that I have had in my life but he is ok,” Charlie thought.

“Charlie, time to get ready for bed!” said Mom.

“Ok I will,” said Charlie. He changed into his pajamas and brushed his teeth.

Once Charlie was ready and lying in bed his mom came in the room and said, “Somebody wanted to join you for the night.”

“Who?” wondered Charlie.

Just then Charlie felt paws on his stomach. Koda turned around a couple times then lied down and put his head on Charlie’s chest and fell asleep.

Charlie woke up to the sound of barking and scratching. Koda was scratching his door to go downstairs. “Here, I will help,” said Charlie.

He opened the door and Koda darted down the hallway towards the living room and jumped on the couch.

Charlie decided to take Koda for a walk around the block. It was cold and windy so Charlie went one time around the block instead of two. Koda started to lift his paws because they were getting so cold.

When they got back inside Charlie looked at the time and it was 4:13 a.m.! “Holy buckets it’s early in the morning,” exclaimed Charlie. “Let’s go back upstairs to bed.”

Charlie carried Koda, who was now sleeping on the couch, up to his room and he lied down and put Koda on his chest and then thought to himself, “Maybe Koda is the best dog after all.”

My First Deer

By Anna Nielsen

It was on December 6 of 2019 that I killed my first deer. It was a Friday like any other, until my dad came to school and picked me up early. Before I left, I happily told the boy I sat with in seventh hour that I was going to kill my first deer today. He just laughed and shook his head.

I left the class and met my father at the office. He had already signed me out, so we left immediately. I threw my backpack into the back of his pickup truck and off we went down the road. I turned the knob that turns the radio on and changed it to a radio station that played country music. Dad and I were acting rather silly as we sang along to the songs that came blasting out of the radio. But fun and games quickly ended as we pulled into our destination.

Our destination was Matt's driveway; he was kind enough to let me hunt on his land. Of course, Matt was on vacation. So his buddy, Jesse, was going to take me to the deer stand and show me which doe to shoot. I didn't know that at the time though, I thought just my dad and I were going to sit in the deer stand. Little did I know how wrong I was.

I had just hopped out of the truck and put on my hunting gear when a beat up, gray van pulled into the driveway. The van parked, the engine was killed, and out popped a man I had never seen before. He introduced himself as Jesse, the man who would be guiding me on my hunt that afternoon.

My dad unlocked Matt's shop and we all went in. Inside the shop there was a table where Matt's muzzleloader sat; the gun I would be shooting that afternoon. Matt had left specific instructions for us. We were to use his ranger to take us to the deer stand, I was to shoot his muzzleloader, and I could only shoot an old doe. Seemed simple enough, and I later learned it was.

My dad had the keys for the Ranger, so he got to drive. I sat in the middle seat, wedged between the two older men. (Jesse had made sure to securely fasten the muzzleloader in the gun rack of the Ranger before he sat down.) The Ranger was fired up and we drove out of the driveway. A quick series of twists and turns lead us to the deer stand. Jesse and I unloaded our supplies from the back of the Ranger and set them in the deer stand. As soon as the supplies were unloaded, my dad drove off in the Ranger. The deer would be coming out soon and if they saw or heard the Ranger they would run away. So my dad drove the Ranger back to the shop and parked it inside. Dad stayed in the shop and watched T.V. as one of the moments that will forever live in my memory happened.

Jesse and I had everything set up the deer stand, our chairs were set, the heater was running, and our pops were opened. He made sure I knew where to shoot the deer, he even looked up pictures to show me. He also ran me through what to do with my gun when I pulled it up to shoot. I had never shot this muzzleloader before so that's why we were practicing. Obviously during practice I didn't shoot it, for a muzzleloader can only shoot once before you

have to reload it and it scares all the deer away. (The reloading process is rather lengthy as well.)

Once practice was over, we sat in silence for a while. Silence and I don't get along, so I started talking. Jesse quickly shushed me because I had spoken too loudly. I whispered after that. He and I talked about a wide array of things as we sat in wait. He even tried setting me up with his son, but I told him I had a boyfriend. He dropped the case after that.

After the boyfriend discussion, I looked out the right facing window and there were five pheasants eating beans. I poked Jesse and pointed to them.

"The deer should be coming out soon," he whispered.

I smiled and nodded before going back to staring out the main window. As the waiting continued, my thoughts wandered. I didn't have any homework, but I wondered if my seventh hour friend did. I didn't get to think about that much more because Jesse nudged me.

"There's some deer in the tree line. Get your gun ready," he whispered.

I opened the front-facing window and put my gun out, resting it on the windowsill. It felt like an eternity as we waited for the deer to leave the tree line and come out into the beanfield.

"There's a buck, but he's a small one," Jesse trailed off. "Shoot the doe that's standing off on her own."

I slightly moved my gun, looked through the scope, and placed my crosshairs where Jesse had previously told me to put them. I hesitated a moment. I had the power of life and death in my hands. Would I really end this deer's life? Of course I would. My family needed to eat, and this doe would provide us meat all winter.

I pulled the trigger and a puff of white smoke erupted from the muzzle of my gun. The doe arched her back and jaggedly ran off, following the other deer as they ran.

I gave Jesse a big grin, all of my facial muscles hurt after that big smile. "We'll wait a minute or two then we will have to look for her. The sun is setting too fast to wait long," Jesse told me.

I nodded, trying to hold my composure and not act like a giddy three-year-old. He turned the heater off, then the two of us exited the stand and started in the direction that the doe went.

My dad had taught me how to track blood trails that had very little blood, but this blood trail had so much blood a blind man could track it. There were long streaks of blood that left the snow crimson red. It was obvious from this amount of blood that I had shot her in the right spot.

We hurriedly tracked the blood trail as the sun quickly set to the west. It only took us a few minutes to find her. She was still breathing when we came upon her, but she only took a few more strangled breaths before she died. I grabbed her front leg and Jesse grabbed the other and the two of us dragged her to the deer stand. The snow was too deep to gut her where she fell. It was tough to drag her through the deep snow, but somehow we did it.

There were only a few licks of sunlight left by the time we got her to the deer stand. Jesse had taken his phone out and had me hold my doe's head up. He took a picture and sent it to my dad, before telling him to come pick us up.

Jesse dragged the doe over to the tree line and quickly gutted her. With the amount of speed he used when gutting her, I'm shocked he didn't cut himself. When gutting her, Jesse found that both of her lungs were popped, proving that my shot was indeed true.

The rumble of the Ranger alerted us that Dad was there. Jesse dragged the doe to the Ranger and had me pop down the tailgate. I did as I was told and then helped him heft her into the back of the Ranger. I closed the tailgate and went to the deer stand to retrieve our supplies.

Before climbing down, I quickly chugged the last of my pop. The Ranger ride to the shop was filled with Jesse telling Dad the story of what happened. I grinned the whole ride to the shop, proud of the deed I had just accomplished. My family would have food this winter. The Ranger was parked in the shop and then Jesse had a grand idea.

"Let's cook the tenderloins in the pizza oven!" Jesse exclaimed. So that's what we did. Jesse cut the tenderloins out of the doe and put them in the pizza oven.

The two older men were telling stories of deer they had killed in their youth as the three of us sat in chairs waiting for the tenderloins to finish cooking. I was just elated as I recalled what had just happened. I couldn't wait to get home and call the boy from seventh hour and tell him what had happened.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the smell of meat cooking. Actually, the meat was done. Jesse had placed a plate with the tenderloins on it on the table, and he and Dad were digging it. I selected a piece

and took it off the plate before those greedy men could eat it. Let me tell you, meat doesn't get much better or much fresher than that.

Hope to Life

By Freya Peterson

My Chinese grandma, my mom, and I were walking on the beach somewhere in China. I was laughing when I heard “Boom, bust, boom!” I felt like I was the only one hearing this because my mom and grandma seemed not to notice.

“Come Freya, come.” They waved at me. I ran to them but all of a sudden, a voice said, “Wake up, wake up!”

I opened my eyes and saw my dad, “Get dressed, eat breakfast, you’ll be late!” Oh...the beach, my Chinese grandma, it was all just a dream. I’m still in America.

I have been in America for four years now, but I frequently dream of China where I was born. Wait, I forgot to introduce my family. My dad is an American and my mom is Chinese, but my dad used to work in China.

My life was happy until something horrible happened in 2015. That year I was four. The two people I love got really sick. My Chinese grandma got cancer and my dad was told he had kidney failure.

One day, my dad told me, “Freya, I have to go back to America to get dialysis but your mom needs to take care of grandma. So, you’ll have to stay in China with mom.” He looked sad and worried. My mom cried too. What’s happening? Why could I only see daddy on iPad? I was very upset. We separated for about a half year, dad was in America and mom and I were in China. I surely missed dad a lot.

In 2017, my Chinese grandma passed away. My mom was in deep sorrow, but she had to take me back to America right after the funeral. Life was so different here and I was curious about everything. I felt unique because I was proud of my own language, but my American grandparents didn’t understand anything I said.

My mom thought it would be easy to get a kidney from the family, but we had no luck. Dad had to go on a donor’s list. At the time, we had nothing except an empty apartment. We had no money, no furniture, no car and no toys. I missed all the toys I left in China.

After three years of dialysis, one day my dad got a call from the hospital. The doctor told him it was his turn to get a new kidney. HOORAY! What unbelievable news! My whole family was very excited. We went to the hospital in The Cities. On the way in the car, my mom was busy calling others. Everyone’s face looked like Christmas morning. It took dad about eight hours to get a kidney transplant. My mom and I stayed up all night, but we didn’t feel tired.

Life has changed a lot since my dad got a new kidney from a waiting list. Now, he doesn’t need to go on dialysis anymore. I can see a smile on his face. He spends more time having fun with us. My mom and I used to be worried that we may lose him some day, but now we see hope is back.

Sometimes, I think what my life would be like if my dad was never sick. I would still be in China. I wouldn’t know anyone I have met here in America. I wouldn’t speak English every day. And of course, I wouldn’t have this opportunity to write this story and share it with others.

I feel thankful for all the people who give donations. Without them, my dad wouldn’t be alive. Since we moved to America, we have got a lot of help from our family, friends and the community. Without donors, we would not have a new beginning, a new life.

My old dream was to become a pet store owner when I grow up because I love animals. I changed my mind and want to be a good doctor in the future. I want to save people’s lives and give help to those who are in need. Our society needs more care, more love and more kindness of heart.

The Fur Trade

By Leila Pratt

The fur trade was a point in time where the Native Americans, such as the Dakota and the Ojibwe, traded furs from beavers, muskrats and foxes to the European Americans. The fur trade lasted for more than 200 years, starting around the year 1600 and ending around 1840.

The fur trade began when the French Voyageurs came to what is now known as Minnesota. At the time, the Dakota and Ojibwe were working together. The French traders offered these tribes glass beads, kettles, guns and axes in exchange for beaver pelts. The Native Americans did not know that this fur trade would eventually change their very culture.

Fur trading was seasonal. In the winter the tribes hunted for the beavers. Beaver pelts were the thickest during this time. In spring, the Native Americans paid off debt they owed to the traders for any trades they made throughout the year. In summer, the traders and voyageurs had time off to relax. They often married Native women during this time to ensure kinship ties. In the fall, many trades took place for essentials they would need that winter or for the coming spring.

There were many jobs during the fur trade. There were jobs the Native Americans filled, not viewed as “jobs” at the time. They were the hunters who hunted for the pelts and the guides who showed the Europeans the way around the land. They were also the interpreters, who helped at trades with their knowledge of both languages.

The Europeans also held many jobs in the fur trade. There were the voyageurs, the clerks and the traders. The voyageurs did the labor work of paddling the furs back and forth for very small amounts of money. Often, that was the only job they could get. The clerks worked under the traders as apprentices. They handled the money and organizing. The traders themselves made the deals. They also hired all the European workers and trained the clerks to one day be traders.

The fur trade took on interesting changes in control. When it began, the French operated the business until England decided they wanted control of it, deciding to fight the French, and winning. Now England owned the fur trade. The Native Americans didn’t like that. Both the Dakota and the Ojibwe liked the French because they offered gifts of kinship. These new traders did not do that.

England had control over the fur trade for quite some time. Eventually, the Revolutionary War took place and the Americans had control. By then, the Native Americans had hunted beavers almost to extinction and no longer made all their tools from scratch. Instead, they relied on trades to get what they needed.

Forty years after the Americans took control of the business, the fur trade declined. It declined for many reasons, the most major one being that beaver hats just weren’t in style anymore. The decline of the fur trade meant that the Natives were now going hungry and struggling to survive. They no longer knew their old ways of survival, after 200 years of living off trades.

The Pandemic and My Journey to Ireland

By Amna Syeda

When the Covid-19 pandemic happened, my mom had to go to Dublin, Ireland to help the people during the pandemic. My little sister and I also went to Ireland with our mom. In Ireland, we got the opportunity to go to a school. So many things were new for me, the culture, the weather, the accent.

I took little time to adjust myself in the new environment. I made new friends. I had fun playing with them and they helped me when I needed help. Irish language is known as Gaelic. It is a beautiful language. I learned some Irish language and started speaking Irish in sentences very quickly and everyone was surprised. I learned a lot about Irish people, their culture and their tradition.

Ireland is so green and very beautiful. During our stay in Ireland, we went on a road trip to Connemara, Galway in Ireland. One defining moment was when I climbed to the top of a hill called Diamond Hill which is 1,600 feet.

I first thought I would not be able to do that as the way to the top was very steep and I was getting scared of the height, but when I made it to the top it was very exciting moment for me. We found a lot of crystals and sang the national anthem at the top.

I had lots of fun with my family too. My journey to Ireland introduced me to this beautiful country and its culture. I learned to live in a new country and adapt to a new culture. For me, the defining moment in this journey was overcoming my fear and reaching to the top of Dimond Hill. I am so proud of myself.

Swimming Changed My Life

By Fatima Syeda

When my mother put me in swimming classes, I was scared. On my first day of swimming, I was scared to go in the water because I thought I would sink.

My teacher helped me to get in the water and showed me how to float. When I tried myself, I was able to float and didn't sink. I was so happy that I could float.

After few days, I started going under the water and it was so cool. This was the defining moment for me that I was not scared of swimming anymore.

About the Authors

Lila Adams is in fifth grade in Mr. Beilke's distance learning classroom. She enjoys writing, reading, playing the piano and all things Harry Potter.

Anden Brandt is a fun loving, energetic kid who loves to play baseball and football. He enjoys hanging out with his friends and doing activities with his family such as camping, mini vacations and even simple things like bike riding around the lake. Anden's favorite subjects in school are math and recess. He likes to read fiction books and was inspired to write his story "The Travelers" because he wanted to be unique and different from the rest of his class. Anden has a crazy imagination and definitely put it to good use writing his story!

Kameron Brink likes to read fiction books and really enjoys books about hockey. He likes to play hockey, and baseball and also likes to hunt with his dad. Kameron's favorite parts of school are gym, art and music. He also likes math and reading. Kameron wants to be a farmer when he grows up.

Aidric Calderon enjoys reading books based on history and stories about animals. One of the main characters in his story, Cali, is actually his Doberman! Aidric has a creative imagination and his favorite subject is math. He loves spending time outdoors and his favorite sport is football. Aidric also enjoys cooking and is known for his perfectly fried eggs!

Zariah DeBerry loves to read and write.

Jordyn Earl is a very athletic and competitive girl. She loves soccer, softball and dance. Jordyn loves the book series "The Babysitters Club" and is also currently reading "Inkheart." She loves reading and math – division and multiplication are her favorites. Jordyn wants to be a full-time marine biologist and a part-time soccer coach.

Claire Elness likes to read and watch movies. She also likes to bake and loves spending time with her friends and family, as well as her pets. Claire likes going outside, too. Her favorite book is "The Martian" by Andy Weir (she loves lots of other books, too, though!). Her favorite movies are *O Brother Where Art Thou* and *The Princess Bride* (but there are many, many more); her favorite food is tacos; her favorite class is either math or science; and her favorite color is blue or maybe pink. Claire also loves to talk – she talks to herself, she talks to other people (even when they don't listen).

Elyzah Erickson is 12 years old and attends Dakota Meadows Middle School. She loves animals – between her grandparents' house and her house, they have seven dogs, nine cats, three horses, two birds, a bunny and a fish. When Elyzah is not riding her horse Blaze, she enjoys Greek mythology, archery, hanging out with friends, swimming, skiing and watching TV shows. Her favorite books are Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Divergent and the Hunger Games. Elyzah's favorite TV show is Heartland. She is looking forward to summer and hanging out with her friends and cousins and swimming at Spring Lake Park pool.

Emmett Gaalswyk is homeschooling this year due to the pandemic. His story is a peek into the dilemma

of loving the outdoors but hating the buzzing in his ears. Emmett is 11 years old and enjoys reading, biking, playing piano and being a fun guy.

Elliott Garry is a fourth-grader at Hoover Elementary. She enjoys dancing, playing soccer, and playing Minecraft and Roblox.

Emerson Garry is a sixth-grader at Dakota Meadows Middle School. She enjoys dancing, playing softball and swimming.

Taryn Hecksel is very enthusiastic and passionate about writing. She loves to make the words come to life on the page.

Madeline Heuss has always loved to write and she uses it as a way to express herself. She hopes to give someone a way to escape and, hopefully, a smile in the process. Maddie has a love for art and hopes to pursue this passion.

Andree Jakovich is a third-grader at Hoover Elementary in North Mankato. She loves to read chapter books.

Marco Jakovich is a seventh-grader at Dakota Meadows Middle School in North Mankato. He loves to read books about Greek mythology.

Sasha Jakovich is a freshman at West High School in Mankato. She loves to read in her free time.

Kaedyn Judd is an eighth-grade student attending WEM Middle School in Morristown.

Helen Kliewer is a senior at Shattuck-St. Mary's School. She is a native of northern Minnesota and has spent many summers in a canoe exploring the Northwoods.

Randi Krueger attends Waterville-Elysian-Morristown Schools. She loves playing soccer and drawing.

Grace LaFrance is an eighth grade student at Waterville-Elysian-Morristown Schools.

Gracie Larson is 10 years old and in fourth grade. Her favorite color is yellow and she loves writing and playing soccer. Math is Gracie's favorite part of school, but she also enjoys dance, all things art and vacations with her family. When she grows up she wants to be a writer for National Geographic and travel all over the world.

Greta Luskey is a seventh-grade student. Her passion for life is devoted to her love of dancing.

Joy MacPherson was thrilled to finally be old enough to submit her work for a contest, like all her older siblings do! She enjoys ballet and playing on the computer in her free time.

Rose MacPherson loves music and owns more than five instruments! She also loves being outside.

Price MacPherson loves to draw in his spare time. He is a yellow-belt in taekwondo.

Grace MacPherson is an award-winning author of non-fiction and fantasy. She enjoys music and socializing in her free time.

Zoe Middleton is a nine-year-old girl who loves to read and write stories. She has also published an article in a Spanish magazine. Zoe enjoys nature and playing with her dog.

Elijah Mons is a 13-year-old at Cleveland Public School with an ambition for music and creative writing. He, along with his brothers, Jack (10) and Charles (8), and his parents live on a hobby farm caring for chickens, ducks, turtles, a dog and bunny. Elijah enjoys running and the outdoors.

Charlie Nelson was inspired to write his story because of the events that happened when he got a puppy. He likes to play hockey and has played since he was four years old. Charlie also plays baseball in the summer. He also loves to do water sports including water skiing, wakeboarding, surfing and kneeboarding. Charlie loves to read and always gets distracted in his room when he's supposed to be doing something else. His mom often finds him in his room reading a book in his bean bag chair. Charlie likes to read Big Nate, Diary of a Wimpy Kid, Harry Potter and Dog Man books.

Anna Nielsen has grown up in the outdoors. Since she could walk, she has been in the field with her father and grandfather. Anna hopes to follow in her father's career path training dogs professionally.

Ella J Olson is 14 years old, non-binary, and a fan of reading and writing (mainly fantasy). They live in the country with their mother, father, sister and brother. Ella's love of writing started in fifth grade and has grown as years passed. They have pride in their work and writing is a way they can truly express themselves.

Lauren Oswald is a young writer that enjoys swimming, playing guitar, reading and crafting in her free time. She loves frogs, mushrooms and rainy days, especially ones where she has time to think and come up with new ideas.

Brynn Payne is a third grader with a wonderful imagination who loves ballet, writing stories and creating art. She is kind and caring and enjoys camping with her family, spending time at the beach and going on adventures!

Freya Peterson is nine years old. She is a third-grader at St. Peter North Elementary School. Freya speaks two languages, English and Chinese. She loves reading and writing, art, skiing and baby harp seals. Freya has two pets, a lovely cat (who she is writing a chapter book about) and a hamster. She dreams of being a famous doctor someday.

Leila Pratt is in sixth grade at Dakota Meadows Middle School. In addition to reading and writing, she enjoys playing soccer, playing piano and oboe, and rollerblading. Leila is excited to have her first story published!

Martha Price is a freshman at Maple River High School. She enjoys writing, painting, taking long walks and spending time with her dog, Daisy. She is involved in cross country, Serteen, FFA, 4-H, speech, Knowledge Bowl, track and field, and dog training.

Leah Proehl is a sophomore at Maple River High School in Mapleton. She has been writing since middle school. Alongside writing, Leah partakes in many other activities including band, speech and tennis. In her free time she likes to draw and play with her cat.

Addie Ricke Young is a 10-year-old music and book lover living in Belle Plaine. She enjoys animals, playing at the beach, and spending time with her friends and family.

Delaney Rosera is a 12-year-old who lives with her mom, dad, sister, bunny and two dogs. She enjoys figure skating and acting when not hanging out with friends.

Andie Sanderson is 14 years old and is an eighth-grader at Dakota Meadows Middle School. She loves to read and spend time with her cat, Rizzo. Andie likes running on track and cross country teams, camping, swimming, and eating anything sweet.

Cami Schuh is in sixth grade at Prairie Winds Middle School. She enjoys reading mysteries and detective stories. Cami is involved with many activities such as student council, Peppers softball and Mankato YMCA Marlins swim team. She has an older sister, Avery, who attends Mankato East High School and a one-year-old Shih Tzu puppy named Fizzy.

Randi Selbrade is in eighth grade at Waterville-Elysian-Morristown Schools.

Angela Shwe likes to read fantasy, mystery and horror books. “Best Babysitters” and “The Promised Neverland” books inspired her to write because they both have very interesting dialogue and dramatic scenes. When she grows up Angela would like to own her own small business that people like. She might also like to be a baker too. One part of school that Angela likes is science because it’s a big adventure – you can learn about the Earth and space, gravity, germs, viruses, and medicine, etc. Angela also likes recess because she doesn’t have to wear a mask and she can get fresh air, exercise, and run around and play. She wants to keep writing in high school and college.

Nityan Sharma is a little bundle of activity, always running, jumping, rolling, always up to something. He loves being outdoors playing soccer or doing yard work and getting all muddy. Nityan is a very sensitive and helpful child who has explanations for everything in his interesting tall tales!

Rohan Sharma loves to play soccer outdoors and loves to read indoors. He always has a list of books he’d like to read and a book he is currently reading. Rohan always looks forward to going to the library and the bookstore!

Annabelle Skurkay just turned 14. She enjoys writing about random topics and letting her imagination flow. Annabelle’s favorite subject is English!

Thomas J. Straka is 17 years old and a junior in high school. He enjoys writing poems and short stories as well as doing things with his hands like building with LEGOs and doing puzzles.

Amna Syeda is originally from Toronto, Canada. She is in third grade and loves reading fiction and nonfiction books and writing on different topics. Amna’s activities and interests include swimming, karate, exploring nature and baking. She wants to become a pediatrician and help sick children when she grows up.

Fatima Syeda is an articulate, hardworking student with a kind heart which everyone adores being loved by.

Devin Vanryswyk likes to read comics and fiction. His favorite book is Spider-Man. Devin likes to play football, play video games, go for bike rides and go swimming. He also likes to spend time with his

family. In school, Devin likes reading books, art class and gym. He would like to become a professional football player when he gets older.

Amara Vanthavong loves graphic novels and fiction chapter books. Her favorite book series is the Baby Sitters Club. Amara's favorite things to do in her free time are dance, art, reading, watching movies, and playing with her sisters and neighbors. Her favorite subjects in school are science, math, art, reading and recess. Amara's favorite activities at school are field trips, Mrs. Seeger's media lessons, Ms. R's social emotional lessons, recess and going outside to read.

Carly Wenninger absolutely loves most kinds of art. She loves to act, paint, write, etc. Carly adores nature and being in it, especially on a sunny day, or a rainy one. Her favorite subjects in school are global studies and English and her favorite color is sage green. Carly loves baking, thrift shopping and listening to music. Mother Mother is her favorite band and Mitski is her favorite artist.

Sophia Williams is finishing her sixth grade year at NRHEG Middle School. She loves to read, write, sing, dance and create art of every kind. Sophia is excited to have her stories chosen for the anthology and hopes that others enjoy her characters.