

Rubber Ring

Middle Grade Short Fiction Anthology

Buzgaga Books

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The Storm
- by Kirsty Tomlin -

Ethan's diary log 2303

“EVERYONE INSIDE!” That’s what the forecasters bel-
lowed.

The panic in their voices made my heart race. My friends and I were just leaving dance school when we heard about the terrible Storm. We scattered off into our home-pods and I’ve got a horrible feeling I won’t see them for a while.

I’ve logged before, how much I nagged Mum to go to dance school. Now I’m finally there, I want to work hard and impress everyone at the end of year performance in the park. I’m now just worried it won’t happen... because of this Storm.

When I stumbled through the airlock into our living-pod, Mum’s face had lost all the usual joy, replaced by strain and

sadness. My stomach dropped to the floor.

Hold on, the hologram reporter is making an announcement.

I've copied and pasted part of the report.



“Today, forecasters have announced a terrible storm is approaching. Enormous, dark clouds are full of multi-coloured raindrops. Reports from neighbouring Burgland are that raindrops affect people differently. Blue and green drops can leave you feeling unwell for a few days, yellow and orange could send you to the infirmary and those unfortunate to be hit by a red drop could die. This storm is serious. Everyone must stay inside until the forecasters know more. We will keep you updated with all the latest news as soon as we have it.”

I don't really know what to think...I'm going to bed... I'll log again tomorrow.

Ethan's diary log 2403

I felt strange this morning. Normally, I'd be bounding off to dance school, but it's closed. I've just been wandering around the home-pod, unsure of what to do. I tried to read a book, but my eyes kept getting lost on the page. Then, I shoved on my smart glasses and tried to play an Augmented Reality game but kept losing. I slammed my glasses onto the sofa and broke them. I just want to dance with my friends! What can I do?

I just asked the Smart box, and it suggested setting up a hologram group chat with my friends. It will feel like we're dancing together, but we'll each be safe in our own living-pods. I'll try it tomorrow and see how it goes.

Ethan's diary log 2503

The hologram box worked brilliantly! We've agreed to meet on hologram every morning. I bounced out of bed this morning, to practice my dancing. It's great knowing I've got that daily session to wake up for. Oh, I can hear Mum calling, better go, I'll log again soon.

Ethan's diary log 1604

It's been weeks since I logged! Seems like the Storm is staying put. Some days have been bad, with lots of red raindrops falling. Whenever a good day of blue raindrops is reported, my body tingles with excitement at the thought of returning to dance school. Today, they said forecasters have been working with scientists to create protective clothing. This will allow everyone to go back outside. I will go back to school, Mum back to work and I could visit Gran again. Must go, the kitchen-bot needs charging before dinner.

Ethan's diary log 2306

My protective clothes arrived today, and I've been out to school! At first, I stepped out the home-pod very slowly. But then the raindrops fell on me and didn't hurt. I knew I was going to be OK. I can't believe how much I've missed it all. My friends and I hugged so hard; we nearly knocked each other over. I'm exhausted from practising all day, so I'm off to bed. I'll log soon.

Ethan's diary log 1408

Great news today, the Storm is easing off and now children can take off the protective clothing. Hologram reporters

said that children only seem to get hit by blue raindrops and are not in danger. Hopefully, I'll be able to visit Gran soon. I'm desperate to show her my dancing. My body aches from practicing so much. We even had a dress rehearsal in the park! I felt calm and happy seeing familiar sights and hearing familiar sounds like the whirring E-Shuttle at the end of the day. Things are looking up!

Ethan's diary log 0601

The last few months have been a rollercoaster of highs and lows. Now, we're at the bottom of a very deep, dark, cavernous low. I've just been sent home from school again. Just when we all thought the Storm was passing, the clouds have built again, and everyone is back inside. It feels like those big, heavy clouds keep trying to push me down and force me not to dance. It's only a few weeks until the end of year performance. We have practiced so hard. I'm determined to dance. I've had an idea.

I'll ask my friends to help collect poles, sheeting, nails and rope and construct a huge canopy in the park so our friends and family can come and watch. Right, I'm off to start building.

Ethan's diary log 0803

We've just done it! The end of year performance!

My cheeks are aching from smiling so much and I'm pretty sure my heart skipped a beat when I saw Mum and Gran in the audience! Arghhh! I'm buzzing!!! It was such fun! The canopy protected everyone who watched. It doesn't seem like this Storm is going to pass though.

It is still raining.

It may keep raining for a while.

But it's mostly blue and green drops now. I realised that we can't just wait around for the Storm to pass, we must all learn to dance in the rain.

Excruciating Bandwidth

- by Liz Lydic -

In the journal labeled '**Food**' Abby Hale wrote 'One sip, Starbucks salted caramel cold drink.'

In the journal labeled '**Tasks**' she wrote 'Got emails down to 10 unread!!'

In the journal labeled '**People**' she wrote 'So many jerks!'

In the journal labeled '**Habits**' she wrote 'Opened Starbucks door with left hand, need to open with right hand when leave.'

In the journal labeled '**Cheerleading**' she wrote 'Plan for

fundraiser meeting.'

She continued in her journals for the next five hours.

Food

Only fruit salad for the next 7 days starting tomorrow. Goal - 3 pound weight loss. Keep it off!

Tasks

Responded to Jenna about History homework. Gave her five websites to use and sent her my report as an example. No thank you from her yet.

People

Jenna is a Fake.

Habits

More pressure in left eye randomly. Balanced out by pressing on right side but still feel it more on left eyelid. NEED to even it out.

Cheerleading

Sent email to group to meet me today for fundraiser

instructions. Goal = raise \$10,000.

Food

Waited 20 minutes after stomach growling before buying protein box from Starbucks!!!!!!!!!! So proud!!!!

Tasks

Emailed Library to suggest teen-only study hours after school. Said that the noise accusations from older patrons are fake news and that we are super chill and can just have the spaces to ourselves 3pm-8:30pm, then the older people can come in from 8:30pm-9pm. Can't wait to see how this pans out!!!!

People

Girl Starbucks clerk kinda judgy. No eye contact. Did I do something wrong? WTF. Sick of people just living in their own worlds.

Habits

Kicked my bad Achilles heel 5x real hard b/c worried I did something to Starbucks girl clerk and need to feel same kind of pain she does. Heel hurts like F.

Cheerleading

Email from Melissa about Fundraiser:

Hi Abby,

I'm not sure how I'm feeling about doing the fundraiser this year. I don't know about anyone else, but I think it's kind of old-school and gross to have the football players dress up as cheerleaders and perform a song on the quad at lunch. I def want to support you, just don't really understand the point as of now.

Melissa

Food

Threw away rest of drink because mad about Melissa email.

Tasks

Ordered Grandma a luggage scale from Amazon for birthday.

People

Top ten coolest and smartest people at school: Chloe R., Sammy, April, Jesus H., Connor, Aimee, Lucia, Courtney P., foreign exchange student from Belgium (Audrick? Aper? Avrard?), Sabrina. What do I need to do to get into top ten?
BRAINSTORM THIS!

Melissa = Worst

Habits

Waiting to pee so don't go more than five times at Starbucks.
Hurts, but it's ok.

Cheerleading

Emailed whole team about fundraiser:

Hi everyone,

Thanks to Melissa for sending me that email against the fundraiser. I had texted Coach Nicole and she is wanting us to move forward. We need to remember that we are seniors, and that this is a tradition. So, you guys have to attend the meeting today, and get ready, people, to have lots of fun and participate!!!! Oceanside Union High School Varsity Cheer Team flies higher!

xo, Team Captain Abby Hale

Food

No eating until at least 10 team members say they are excited for the fundraiser and that I'm a great captain.

Tasks

Newspaper headline ideas for when teen-only study library hours thing is successful:

'Teen Encourages Collaboration at Public Library'

'Teen Takes First Step Toward Generational Harmony'

'Local Young Woman Speaks Up; Changes History'

People

Two sophomores from school came in and didn't order anything and then left. Both showing their stomach in crop top shirts. Starbucks girl clerk tried to help them. They didn't even acknowledge her. Maybe S-bucks girl clerk is ok after all?

Habits

Took five breaths when felt like jiggling my left knee the exact same amount of times as right knee, even though I lost count and then wanted to do a thousand jiggles on left to be sure. Need to text Dr. Binder that I'm proud of redirecting myself!!!!

Cheerleading

FIVE cheer team "Members" emailed that they can't come to the fundraiser meeting. Emailed them back asking for specific reasons why not and to give me alternative dates for me to

meet with them to go over what's covered at meeting. NO ONE OFF THE HOOK!

Food

Skip dinner tonight UNLESS team members change their minds about attending fundraising meeting.

Tasks

Texted mom days I need to use her car for cheer this week.

Asked her again to join What's App instead of texting. She said no.

People

Mad at mom for being closed-minded. She NEVER likes my ideas. I feel totally unseen. She is just an agent of 'No'. WTF

Habits

Ended up jiggling left knee a thousand times. No text to Dr. B, that would just be super disappointing to her.

Cheerleading

Ava and Emilee both said they are coming to the meeting today! (Both said they had to leave early, tho). Sent group email

that those two are great examples of cheer team members for following their captain's directions.

Food

Got a yogurt parfait and ate half, threw away rest to save calories. Tasted soooooo good and ok to eat since I got two members of cheer to agree to come to meeting.

Tasks

Buy gifts for Ava and Emilee to show them that they are great friends and I appreciate their respecting me. Notebooks? Gift cards? Maybe matching rings with inscriptions that say 'High Class'? Or 'Classy'? Or 'Incredible'? RESEARCH THIS!!

People

Ava and Emilee are amazing. Noticing the ways they have helped me grow as a student, captain and young woman. So grateful!!!!!!

Habits

Wanted to open my purse and check/recheck 10 times for my ID and credit card but I didn't!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Ava and Emilee have helped me SOOOOOOOOOO much. I'm so effing proud!!

Cheerleading

Ava emailed *Sorry, Abs. Can't make it after all. My mom's thing she said I had to go to for my uncle starts earlier than I thought. Maybe just text me what happens at the meeting? TY! - A*

Food

For next seven days fruit salad idea, on days 1, 3, 5 and 7, only eat citrus fruits. (helps with hydration and are natural laxatives). Eat fruit intuitively - it's not a diet!!!!!!

Tasks

Ignore Ava. I'm DONE with her! She is a betrayer who doesn't think for herself, makes up stories to get friends, and is TOXIC.

People

I'M DONE w/ AVA!

Habits

Jiggled knees together for a long time before I noticed and only noticed because table was shaking. Realized it's a good inner thigh workout so it's not a coping habit, but actually a physical exercise habit. Not going to report this to Dr. B.

Cheerleading

Cheerleading is a dying sport full of anti-feminist practices and sexism. I don't think I any longer want to be part of this destructive environment. Send Coach Nicole this info in a text later. (at 3pm exactly)

Food

Ate a chocolate chip cookie after sent Coach N the text. Tasted SOOOOOOO good, but NO MORE COOKIES for 6 months!! I've had enough!!!!

Tasks

Emailed school newspaper editor Shavonna R about newspaper pressroom openings. For my first gig, write an investigative report about the toxicity of the OUHS cheer squad but under a fake name so no one knows it's me. Tell Shavonna I'm willing to go undercover.

People

Looked up Shavonna R on social media and never noticed how nice her teeth are. She also has a super cute off-the-shoulder sweatshirt on in one of her profile pics. Can't find it online, but need one just like that. It makes her look really

good. She's amazing.

Habits

Checked for ID and credit card 5 times. Tried not to but can't get Ava's face out of my mind. Literally everyone thinks (knows) she is super cute. And has nice stuff and cool style. Checked wallet/cash 10 times after looking at her social media. Sucks to even write that down. I want to be STRONGER than this!

Cheerleading

Need to strategize response if Coach asks me to stay when she texts me back from my resignation.

Food

Drank 48oz of water super fast. Stomach hurts but I think that'll help me not be hungry until dinner?
Texted mom to see what was for dinner. No response. Ugh!



Tasks

SHAVONNA FRIENDED ME ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND TOLD ME TO MEET HER IN THE NEWSPAPER ROOM ON MONDAY AT 1pm!!!!!!!!!!!!

People

Shavonna R is amazing and is going to help me grow as a reporter/Editor and I cannot WAIT to hang out with more intelligent people who are actually going to do good in this world. SO HAPPY.

Habits

Feel like I probably won't even need to do any checking or verifying once I start newspaper. Feel less stuck already. Fingers crossed I'm cured up!

Cheerleading

DONE

Hollow Magic

- by Lisa Allen -

I don't want you to think this is a scary story about toothless, warty witches and slimy bog creatures. Because real magic isn't like that. Or at least it isn't round here.

Where I live, magic comes in all shapes and sizes. You often can't see it coming until it's too late and you're trapped in the hollow trunk of a 1,000-year-old oak tree.

You could say it was totally my fault. I should never have eaten the chocolate chip cookie. The one with the sign next to it that read: "DO NOT EAT". In red capitals. With an arrow pointing at the cookie.



Dear reader, I ate it. It was moist, sweet and delicious. Unfortunately, it was also enchanted. And I suffered the consequences. But I'm not taking all the blame.

OK, the cookie was in the kitchen of my best friend Maz's house. And her mum is a witch (full set of teeth, no wart, great baker). But it looked so inviting.

I wanted everyone to think Maz had stolen the precious cookie. She'd ditched me in school that day. I'd specifically told her to wait for me while I popped to the loo, because I hated turning up alone to class. But when I'd come back, she wasn't there. Best friends don't ditch each other.

Then I'd had to go to her house after school because no one was home. We'd argued all the way there and, while Maz was sulking in her room, I'd moped in the kitchen.

I wanted her to get in trouble. Just for a moment. Just for

as long as it took me to eat the cookie. And even before I felt a weird tingling and started to fade out of the kitchen, I'd already forgiven her.

No one noticed the cookie was missing. Maz's parents were too busy looking for me, calling Mum to ask whether I'd gone home without telling Maz, shouting my name in the park opposite the house.

I could hear them as I struggled inside the tree. My arms and legs were wedged against rough wood. Through a tiny crack in the trunk, I could see Maz jogging around and calling for me. "I'm sorry, Dara! I really didn't mean to leave you behind! Dara!"

I tried yelling but my voice just thudded back at me from the thick wood. A huge, hairy caterpillar crawled millimetres from my nose. A black spider with stripes on its back dangled from a thread by my eye. I let out a sneeze that sent them scurrying away.

It grew dark eventually. People were searching with torches. I caught glimpses of blue flashing lights and sniffer dogs.

I suppose I should have been scared. But I was enjoying the woody, earthy scents of the ancient tree around me. It was soothing and very cosy, even as the December wind whistled through the branches.



One of the police dogs nearly found me. But, after taking a long sniff all around the base of the trunk, it lifted its leg, peed and loped off after its handler.

Mum always said I'd come to a sticky end. She probably didn't mean stuck inside a tree after eating a cookie that wasn't meant for me. As I watched the groups of people disperse, I wondered who was supposed to eat it.

We don't have many enemies here in Druids Hollow. Anyone we don't like tends to steer clear. The big sign on the way into town helps: "Keep out! Druids Hollow – home to super-scary sorcerers and man-munching monsters!"

So the darker kind of magic isn't needed. The kind that condemns innocent children to a tree-related doom. Maybe

she was expecting unwanted guests. Not answering the door might have been a better plan than baking dangerous cookies and leaving them lying around.

As it got later and later, I could hear foxes wailing, owls hooting, scrabbling sounds in the tree. Something ran over my foot, and I don't even want to talk about what I felt plop onto my head.

I must have napped, lulled by the whispering leaves and the hug of the tree. Then the rising sun shone directly into my eye through the crack in the trunk. For a moment, I was terrified, struggled to move my arms and legs. The tree creaked and groaned but wouldn't release its grip.

Now was the time to test out some of the spells Mum was always trying to make me learn. She said it didn't matter that we weren't witches - anyone could use a spell if they said it in the right way.

I could remember spells for tidying my room, emptying the bins or feeding the cat, all the ones for avoiding chores. No one had taught me a spell for escaping a tree trunk.

Maz claimed to know one that would get you home at lightning speed if you were late for dinner. I tried that because it seemed better than nothing. I sang, as loudly and clearly as I could:

*“Home, home by the fire,
Where the trolls and the bog fairies play.
Where never is heard an invisible nerd
And the pixies are cheeky all day.”*

I’m not saying she made it up. Although, it didn’t sound like one of her mum’s spells. And, surprise, surprise, it didn’t get me out of the tree.

A search party returned, calling for me but a lot less insistently. I tried praying to every god, sprite or faerie I’d heard of. I promised that from now on I’d be better. Better in every way. Better behaved, better groomed, better equipped for any eventuality.

I promised I’d think before I ate a clearly labelled cookie. I promised I’d be kind to my parents, more helpful at home and less grumpy when hungry. I promised to try harder in Maths. I promised to stop getting stroppy with Maz.

Nothing happened. I didn’t really expect it to, but you’ve got to have hope when trapped in a tree. Mostly I hoped to be rescued by a hero with a sparkly wand and a glittering cape. The kind of hero you don’t actually see round here, because that’s not real magic.

My hero, however, was small and hairy with a red-spotted bandana round his neck. Maz's dog, Woody, must have been able to smell something through the thick trunk. Some faint scent of me perhaps? More likely he could smell chocolate chip cookie.

"Woody! Woody!" I tried to scream, squeal, squeak, squawk.

Woody stared up at the tree, his head on one side.

"Yes! Woody! It's me! Where's Maz? Fetch Maz!" I squeaked as loudly as I could, straining my throat, which felt scratchy, as if full of splinters.

He scampered off towards a group of people, yapping and jumping.

"Get down, Woody!" shouted a familiar voice. "Hey! Stop pulling my coat! Woody, what is it?"

I glimpsed Woody trying to drag Maz towards the tree.

"Have you found something?" A yap of approval. "Ok, show me. Good boy. Show me!"

Woody scabbled at the base of the tree, scratching the bark with his claws. The scraping sound ran right through my nerves.

But Maz couldn't understand. "Woody, what's wrong? It's just a tree!"

“What’s going on, Maz?” called another voice I recognised. Maz’s mum.

“Woody’s going crazy about this tree. I thought he’d found Dara but maybe it’s just a squirrel...” Maz sniffed and wiped away tears.

Her mum placed her hand against the trunk. Closing her eyes, she murmured something and then gasped. “Oh, Dara, you didn’t! Dara? Dara? Are you in there?” She was searching all over the tree for an opening.

“I think your friend Dara may have done something stupid. She should know better than to eat cookies uninvited in my kitchen. I was just experimenting... I was going to try it out on Woody... He’d have found his way back out... Quick, go and fetch the others! I’ll need help.”

As Maz ran off, her mum placed both hands on the trunk and began to hum. She was joined by three other mums from school. I hadn’t realised they were all witches too.

The four women hummed and muttered; their hands pressed firmly against the ancient oak tree. A strange tingling travelled through my body, starting at my toes and working its way up until my hair fizzed. I scrunched up my eyes, too scared to breathe.

Flickering lights danced across the inside of my eyelids. I

could hear the thudding of my heart as I felt my body lift, float and spin gently round.



The humming stopped. A clock was ticking. Without the tree trunk to hold me, my body felt loose and floppy.

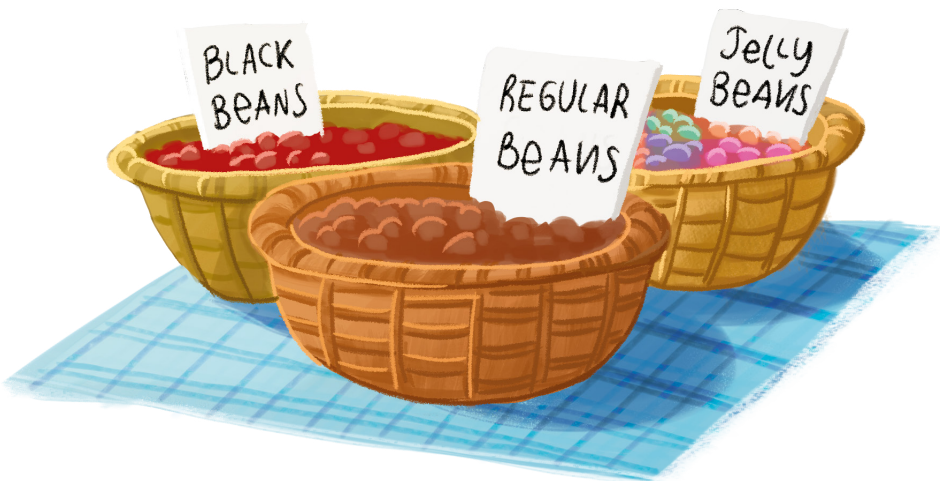
As I began to fall in an exhausted faint, I caught sight of a pile of cookies on a worktop and heard my best friend clattering through the front door, just in time to catch me.

Jacqueline's Beanstalk

- by Valerie Hunter -

Ma turned from the stove. "Jacqueline, I need beans for this stew. Go to the market and buy some."

Jacqueline took the coin her mother gave her and walked to the market. She looked at all the stalls. There were many types of beans being sold: lima beans, black beans, string beans, even jelly beans.



Ma hadn't said what type of beans she wanted, so Jacqueline hemmed and hawed. One of the vendors called, "Hey, girly! Buy from me."

Jacqueline looked at the vendor's beans, which didn't look like any she'd ever seen before. "What are they?" she asked.

"They're magic beans."

"Are they tasty?"

The vendor frowned. "You don't waste magic beans by eating them!"

"I need beans I can eat. Do they taste good in stew?"

"Sure. If you're silly enough to eat them, they taste delicious."

So Jacqueline bought the magic beans and brought them home.

"What are *those*?!" Ma shrieked when she saw them.

"Magic beans," Jacqueline said. "The vendor says they're delicious."

"You've been hoodwinked! You've been swindled! Imagine trying to eat *those*. Get rid of them! The stew will have to be beanless."

Jacqueline took the beans outside. Ma hadn't said how to get rid of them. Should she put them in the trash? Stomp them to bits? Throw them in the river? The beans reminded her a little of flower seeds, so she decided to bury them in the garden.

As soon as she buried the beans, a stalk exploded from the ground and kept going, making a sound like an elephant's trumpet as

it grew and grew.



Ma came outside. “What is *that*?!”

“A beanstalk,” Jacqueline said. “It sprung up when I buried the magic beans.”

“It’ll suck the garden dry! It’ll strangle the house! Get rid of it!”
Ma went back inside, slamming the door.

Jacqueline looked at the gigantic beanstalk and tried to figure out the best way to get rid of it. She could dig it up, but its roots might be very deep. She could chop it down, but it might fall and crush the house. She decided to climb to the top and then cut it little

by little on her way back down.

Jacqueline took the axe and started climbing. She liked climbing trees, but this was much higher. Luckily, the leaves were thick and seemed almost like stairs against the huge stalk.

Jacqueline waved to birds and passed through clouds. When she finally reached the top, the clouds were more solid. They could support a person's weight, so Jacqueline wandered a little. But she didn't see anything interesting, and Ma had said to get rid of the beanstalk, so she soon turned back.

A tiny man was waiting for her. "I can't let you go back. I've been waiting a long time for help from someone as large as you."

"What do you mean?" Jacqueline asked. She wasn't very large at all, although she was taller than the little man.

"If you want to get down, first get rid of the giant who lives over thataway," the man said, pointing. "He's a menace, I tell you, a menace! None of us can get rid of him. It's up to you. Anyone who can climb a beanstalk can get rid of a giant."

Jacqueline sighed. She didn't ask the man what he meant by 'get rid of.' She just hefted up her axe and went in the direction he'd pointed.

She found the house, surrounded by an enormous garden. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

A man came to the door. He was a tall man, but not a giant. He

had a bushy beard and the saddest eyes Jacqueline had ever seen.

“Hello,” she said, offering her hand. “I’m Jacqueline. What’s your name?”

The man shook her hand. “I’m Vincent. I suppose... I suppose you’re here to get rid of me. I was hoping they wouldn’t be able to find anyone to do it.”

“Why do they want to get rid of you?” Jacqueline asked.

Vincent nodded towards his garden. “It’s my beans. Everyone here is allergic to them. They can’t understand why I grow such vile, poisonous things. But they’re not poisonous to me. I like them.” He hung his head. “Everyone wants me gone so they can destroy my garden. Except they’re scared of me because I’m so big. I didn’t think they’d find anyone brave enough to get rid of me, but here you are...”

Jacqueline nodded. “You need to come with me. But it’s OK. You can pick all your beans and bring them along.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my house. My ma’s making stew, and there’ll be enough for you, too, if we can use some of your beans.”

So they picked all the beans in Vincent’s garden. There were lima beans and navy beans, black beans and white beans, string beans and jelly beans, more beans than Jacqueline had ever seen before, even at the market. They put them in sacks and walked back to the beanstalk. When the little man saw them coming, he fled from

the giant and all those beans. Jacqueline and Vincent climbed down easily, with Jacqueline chopping apart the beanstalk as they went.



Ma was waiting for them at the bottom. “Who is *this*?!”

“This is Vincent,” Jacqueline said.

“I brought you some beans, ma’am,” Vincent said, holding out his sack.

“But only if he can stay for supper,” Jacqueline added.

So Vincent stayed for supper and the stew was hearty and full of beans. The next day Jacqueline took Vincent to the market, and

he set up a stall. He sold some of his beans, and he kept some to use as seed when he started a new garden, but he also gave some to Jacqueline.

“They’re magic beans,” he told her. “I never acquired a taste for them myself, and no one seems to want to buy them. Can you get rid of them for me?”

Jacqueline grinned. “Sure.”

Dot Dot Dot

- by Paul Hostovsky -

Waverly was all upset about the new Braille code. “They’ve changed everything,” he cried, throwing the pages to the floor in a flurry of white Braille dots, shaking his head back and forth, back and forth, the way some blind people do, not in disagreement but in a sort of pleasure of release, getting the energy out that couldn’t get out through his eyes. “They’re messing with the symmetry of it, the beauty of it, the blind *mind*, for god’s sake!” Belinda had never seen him so upset.

“What kind of changes?” she asked, picking the Braille up off the floor and running her fingers over the dots. Belinda didn’t know Braille, and had only known Waverly since moving into the apartment next to his a couple of months ago. She handed him back the pages and he accepted them reluctantly, giving

them a smack with the back of his hand, then caressing them lovingly, the way you might a favorite, refractory child. “They’re calling it UEB,” he said, “Unified English Braille. Unification by mutilation is what I call it. They’re changing our Braille code which has remained basically unchanged since Louis Braille first invented it over two hundred years ago. And they didn’t even ask us. For starters, they’re cutting out nine contractions, including some of my favorites: -COM, -BLE, -ALLY, and -ATION. And, incredibly, O’CLOCK. And they’re changing the punctuation. Look!” He held up a single white page for her inspection, his accusatory index finger stabbing at some dots in the upper left-hand corner.

“Waverly,” she said, “you know I can’t read that. I mean, I see what you’re pointing at, but I have no idea what it is. What is that?”

“That, my dear, is a parenthesis. A very ugly parenthesis. The old parentheses were beautiful, uniform, each a perfect little square at the bottom of the Braille cell, like two identical gates at the beginning and ending of anything parenthetical. But now they’ve gone and changed them, and these new parentheses are boring, vulgar, artless. And they take up too much space. They take up four whole Braille cells. Can you imagine!”

No, she couldn’t imagine. And that, in a nutshell, was the

problem. She couldn't imagine how he was able to make sense of all those tiny white goosebumps on the page, couldn't imagine what it must be like being blind, and couldn't imagine, finally, what it must be like to kiss him, or to be kissed by him, which, surprisingly, she found herself trying to imagine, watching his mouth as he spoke, that most beautiful and expressive part of him.

His hands were trembling as he turned the pages. "Look at this," he said. She leaned over for a better look. "See all this wasted space? Here? And here? And here? These black holes where there used to be constellations that shone with the light of logic and efficiency. You used to be able to link these symbols to save space. But look, they're no longer linked, just floating around on the page looking disconnected, dispirited, glum. TO and INTO no longer connect to the subsequent word. TO isn't even contracted anymore. Neither is BY. And I'll bet I'm not the only Braille reader mistaking the BY for a BEYOND."

Mistaking the BY for a BEYOND? Belinda was totally lost. It was as though Waverly were speaking a different language. "Is Braille a different language?" she asked him timidly, a slight quaver in her voice, which he must have noticed because he reached for her hand reassuringly...

"No, dear," he said, "Braille isn't a different language. But it's

different music. When the words are different but the music stays the same, that's translation. Braille transcription is when the words stay the same but the music that contains them-- transports them, carries them to wherever they're going--is a different music. It's like English is the boat and Braille is the sea."

She didn't quite get the analogy, but she liked it when he called her "dear," and she liked the feel of his warm hand on her hand, and she found herself nodding her head even though he couldn't see her. And then she found herself--most unexpectedly--leaning in to kiss him. And the Braille pages dropped to the floor in a blizzard of white dots, all those Unified English Braille dots that someone had gone and changed without Waverly's approval. And this time neither of them bent down to pick them up, because how important was it, now that they had found each other's lips, found this new and unreadable thing, too late to understand it or approve of it or disapprove of it.

But then Waverly pulled away, his lips separating from hers like the rubber lips of the refrigerator door unsticking, sending an arctic exhalation into Belinda's face. "But the punctuation!" he exclaimed.

"What?" she cried, straightening up and smoothing her skirt, beginning to close her heart just the littlest bit. "What about the

punctuation?”

“They’ve changed some of the other punctuation marks too,” cried Waverly, “the question mark, the exclamation point, the period, the comma, the ellipsis...”

“Oh no!” Belinda squealed, reaching for his hand and trying to pull him back. But he was already gone, down on his knees, sweeping his hands around on the floor for the dropped Braille.



“They’ve changed them all,” he said. “And now some of them take up two whole Braille cells. Actually, three!”

The Braille cell. It was like Waverly was a prisoner of the Braille cell. And he wouldn’t come out. And she couldn’t get in. All she could do was listen while he ranted about the injustice of it all. “I mean, can you imagine?” he cried.

Belinda stopped trying to imagine. “No,” she said. “I can’t,” and kissed him once on the forehead, got up and walked out the door, leaving it wide open while Waverly went on reading the Braille, shaking his head back and forth, back and forth, getting all that energy out, the energy that couldn’t get out through his eyes, and which otherwise would surely have gone *kaboom*.

Ready or Not, Here I Come

- by Shelby E. Reed -

After nine hours on the road, twelve-year-old Izabelle was glad to be getting out of the family SUV. She'd been cramped far too long between an older brother eating beef jerky and an annoying little sister playing Toca Boca. A rusty silver bus sat in the front yard of their new home, with the words *GO AWAY SAM* painted on the side.

"Well, kiddos, we made it to Monroe, Utah. What do you think?" her mom Maggie asked with hope in her voice.

"Does it have internet?" Nolan mumbled.

"I call the room in that tall tower!" Hailey shouted as she ran for the door.

Izabelle stood perfectly still. Taking in the strange view of

their new home; an old west farmhouse with a bizarre wooden tower rising up on one side. She wondered if you could see the hot springs from the top. That's what Monroe was famous for, a big hot spring surrounded by the red rocks of the Utah desert landscape. A tumbleweed rolled past her leg towards the barn on the side of the house. Crickets jumped and chirped loud enough to wake the dead.

"I like it. But, it'll take us years to flip this one Mom," Isabelle finally answered. She knew it wasn't smart to stay anywhere for more than six months. This was what they did... Moved from town to town, buying and fixing up old run-down houses. It was how they survived. "What'd you pay for it anyhow?"

"Less than half of what we made flipping the old Macmillan place. And this one is twice as big. Once we are done with it, can you imagine? We might make enough to really go somewhere special next time."

Isabelle swatted the no-see-ums away from her face. "Twice as big means twice as much work Mom. How are we gonna paint that tower?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that. Didn't I tell you about the time I repelled down a water tower in Bosnia?" Maggie asked as she opened the back of the SUV and heaved out their suit-

cases.

“What does repelling down an old water tower in the Army have to do with painting a house?” Izabelle frowned. The sun was sinking fast, and it would be dark soon. She grabbed the suitcases and started dragging them towards the house. The lights were burning brightly in every window— Nolan and Hailey were performing their usual, *check every light and open every door drill*.

“It means I can tie myself off and hang out the tower window and walk my way around it with a paint sprayer.”

“That sounds safe.”

Maggie laughed. “Let’s get inside before we are completely eaten alive by bugs.”

“Mom, why does that bus say *Go Away Sam*, on it?” Izabelle had to ask.

“The man at the bank said the old guy who lived here was pretty nutty at the end. Sam was his dead son.”

“Great, you bought a ghost house.” Izabelle trudged up the steps.

“I wish it hadn’t gotten dark out. You can see EVERYTHING from the tower!” Hailey buzzed in the kitchen as Izabelle put some canned soup on the stove for a late dinner. They always

had canned soup with them when they moved. *Even in a dump, the stove works.* One of Maggie's many euphemisms.

"You can show me the tower tomorrow," Izabelle said with a smile. Hailey loved moving day. She explored each new home like it was a hidden kingdom, left long ago by its people, just waiting for her to discover its secret treasures. She had a whole box filled with trinkets she'd found from all the houses they'd flipped. Pocket watches, rocks shaped like hearts, vintage rings, goofy polaroid pictures.

People left a lot of stuff behind in old houses.

Bits of their soul.

"I don't know how you got my number, but lose it, JERK!" Maggie was shouting in the other room.

"You okay Mom?" Izabelle walked away from the stove and headed for her mom. "Keep an eye on the soup Hailey," she said over her shoulder. The inside of the house was big— the ceilings were fourteen feet tall, according to Nolan, who never went anywhere without his cell phone and a tape measure.

Dark wood wrapped almost every surface. Her mom would paint it white, or at least whitewash the dark surfaces. She didn't even have to ask, it's just what she did. Bright. People want to buy bright and shiny things. Including houses. *Paint can fix almost anything.* Another one of her mom's ev-

er-so-helpful life tips. Isabelle rolled her eyes.

“Mom, where’d you go?” Isabelle called out. She walked through the room meant for a library, with its huge empty, dusty, shelves that ran from floor to ceiling. It had pocket doors hanging cockeyed off the rollers and spiderwebs draped the surfaces. There was a shadow in the corner that caught Isabelle’s eye, she took one step towards it, when her mom called out to her.

“I’m in here...”

Isabelle ran from the shadow and found her mom in the front entry. “You kids are done eating already? You better get the air mattresses blown up and go to sleep halfway early. You know what I say, the early bird gets the worm. We have a lot to do tomorrow.” Maggie wiped her eyes. She’d been crying.

“Who was on the phone?”

“No one. We’ll be fine.”

“Why wouldn’t we be fine?” Isabelle asked. Her heart skipped a beat. There was only one person who made her mom cry. Hunt. Hailey’s horrible dead-beat dad. Isabelle never claimed him as her ex-stepdad. What was the point? He was the reason they started moving from house to house. Running. Hiding.

“Was it Hunt?” Isabelle knew she shouldn’t ask, but she

did anyway. The look on her mom's face said it all. "Guess you should go into town and get a new number for your phone tomorrow. Maybe you could get the internet set up too. Me and Nolan can start airing out the house and getting the cobwebs down while you're gone."

"Oh Izabelle, what would I do without you?" her mom gripped her in a tight bear hug. "Do you smell something burning?"

"The soup!"

"Come on, let's see if we can salvage it." Maggie said.

Nolan and Hailey were arguing over who was supposed to be stirring the soup. Maggie swooped in and dished it up with a box of saltines. They sat eating in silence. It was an unspoken rule; Hunt was never discussed in front of Hailey. Halfway through their meal, just when they were all starting to laugh and joke, Maggie's phone rang. She looked at it, face turning pale.

"Who's calling Mom?" Hailey asked.

"No one," Izabelle and Maggie replied at the same time. Nolan narrowed his eyes on Izabelle first, then their mom. He was smart, he'd have it figured out before the next call. Because with Hunt, it was never just one or two calls. Once he got her number, he'd call a thousand times.

Buzz.

Silenced.

Buzz.

Silenced.

“Mom, just turn it off.” Nolan flung his spoon into his empty bowl and pushed backwards in his chair, standing up from the table in one angry movement. The lights flickered and his chair toppled over backwards, as if someone had pulled it from behind.

“Nolan! Relax. We don’t want to break any of the original furniture— this stuff is worth money once I’m done refinishing everything. It’s going to be fine.” She glared at him, but Izabelle saw the silent plea, *please don’t let Hailey know it’s her father calling*. Nolan nodded once.

“Sorry Mom,” he grumbled and picked up the chair. The lights flickered again. “It’s late. I’m going to bed.” He left the kitchen with his shoulders slumped. Izabelle hoped he’d be in a better mood tomorrow while they cleaned spider webs together. She already had several pranks worked out involving a fake spider ring from last Halloween.

Nolan was no fun when he was tired and cranky.

“We should all go to bed.” Maggie’s eyes were dark and sunken.

“I don’t want to go to bed yet! I want to play hide and seek. Please, it’s so fun in a new house and no one knows where to look for me. I already found three good hiding spots,” Hailey begged.

“No. It’s bedtime.”

“It’s okay Mom. I’ll play one round with her. You can go to bed– It won’t take long. While we were driving, I memorized the floor plan attached to the deed. So joke’s on you Hailey. I’m going to find you in under five minutes.” Isabelle laughed. She was glad to have something to think about instead of Hunt.

“I don’t know how you have the energy to keep playing, after the day we’ve had. Just don’t stay up too much longer. We have a busy day tomorrow girls. Your old Mom needs some sleep,” Maggie said and gave them both a kiss on the head before walking out of the kitchen. They could hear her walk up the stairs in the front of the house. Isabelle listened to the squeaking of the stairs. One, squeak, three, four, squeak, six, squeak, then the sound faded out.

“I counted them too,” Hailey said and stuck out her tongue. “You’ll never find me! Now close your eyes and count to one hundred.”

“One hundred? That’s crazy!” Isabelle exclaimed.

“Well, it’s a big house. I told you I have good hiding

spots. It's going to take time to get there." She laughed and ran out of the kitchen as soon as Izabelle closed her eyes and started counting.

Izabelle strained her ears, hoping maybe Hailey hadn't counted the steps right when her mom went up to bed. A squeak would be a dead giveaway and would eliminate searching half the house. But she didn't hear any squeaking. The house was eerily silent. Most old houses made noises even when nothing was happening. *They like to breathe; they tell me their story.* More Maggie.

"Ninety-nine, one hundred. Ready or not, here I come," Izabelle whispered. She tiptoed from room to room checking under the sheet draped ghostly furniture and behind boxes. She peeked between broken doors leaning haphazardly against walls. There were so many places for a small girl to hide. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, it could take hours to find her. But, where would the fun be in defeat?



“I’m going to find you,” she said as she wandered around in the dark. Hailey must have turned off all the lights. Sneaky!

At first Izabelle tried a methodical approach, systematically going from the library to the formal living room, to the parlor and back towards the kitchen ending at the bathroom. She used her cell phone flashlight to help illuminate the rooms so she wouldn’t trip in the dark. “Sheesh, kid, where are you?”

She walked through a door she didn’t remember from the house plans. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. “Don’t be stupid,” she said to herself. Old houses often had rooms added on, extending the original structures. She waved her phone flashlight around. Windows lined the back wall, overlooking a field behind the house.

Something big and square was in the center of the room covered with a white sheet. Perfect for hiding under. With one quick swoop, she pulled the sheet. For a split second she imagined it was covering something sinister, like a table full of knives. But when the sheet fell away, it was only an old pool table.

“Sweet! Nolan will dig this,” she said and smiled, glad it wasn’t a murder room. Tomorrow after cleaning, she’d challenge her siblings to a game. Just as she was about to leave the pool room, a gust of wind ruffled her hair. She turned around

and saw a door in the wall of windows standing wide open.



“Did you go outside? That’s not smart Hailey.”

Izabelle walked through the door and into the cool Utah night air. A shadowy figure stood on the horizon, illuminated by the stars and the moon. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. *Maybe it’s Sam*, a voice whispered in her head.

“Go away Sam!” Izabelle shouted. Her heart was racing.

Her mind was spinning. *Fear, Izabelle is nothing more than false evidence appearing real. They taught me that on my first day in basic training.* Almost as much as giving her three children advice in the form of useless catch phrases, Maggie loved talking about her days in the army; and it was even better when she could combine the two.

Thinking about her mom made Izabelle feel better. “Mom is brave. I can be brave.” When she looked again, the shadowy figure was gone. “I’m done playing hide and seek. This is stupid.” Izabelle folded her arms over her chest. Something flashed and she looked up at the odd looming tower on the house. It had to be at least four or five stories tall. Then she saw it again, a light blinking at the very top.

“Ha! I see you up there Hailey.” Izabelle ran to the back door on the patio. But the door was closed, and locked. “Hello?” Izabelle jiggled the handle. Did Hailey lock her out and run up to the top of the tower to blink the light? That didn’t seem like her little sister. Sure they played pranks on each other, but locking her out at night?

With no other option, Izabelle ran toward the front of the house. “Please no snakes,” she begged. She hated snakes. Just as she rounded the corner of the house, she saw a dark figure on the porch. This time she wouldn’t let her fear get the best of

her. “Sam, I told you to go away.”

But the dark figure turned, not evaporating into the night.

It wasn't Sam. It was Hunt.

“What are you doing here?” She demanded.

“Is that anyway to talk to your dear old stepdaddy?” He asked. The light on the front porch flickered wildly. “Who's Sam. That your mom's new man?” Hunt sneered. Then he turned and twisted the lightbulb, trying to get it to stop flickering. Izabelle saw the flash of metal at his hip. It was like a punch to her gut. She'd never have another chance, so she ran off the porch and around the side of the house.

HUNT IS HERE. She managed to text her brother while she ran. Her heart was pounding. Hunt was former Army like her mom. A beast of a man. But his size made him slow. She could outrun him, easy, but the door. She had to get inside and find Hailey and hide, but for all she knew, Hailey was sound asleep up in the tower, tired of waiting to be found.

As she reached the back, the door to the pool room swung wide open.

“Thank you, Sam.” Izabelle ran in and slammed the glass door shut and locked it. She knew it wouldn't stop Hunt for long. He'd just crash right through it and let the glass tear up his body. Or he'd take out the pistol from his hip and shoot it.

Her phone started vibrating in her hand as she ran around the pool table and back into the hallway by the bathroom. “WHERE ARE YOU!” Nolan screamed.

“I’m downstairs, he has a gun, he’s trying to get into the house—” BANG! The gun. He shot the back door out. BANG! Twice.

Izabelle ran for the staircase. Nolan and her mom were rushing down.

“Back up! Hunt has a gun and he’s coming!” Izabelle took the steps two at a time. “I never found Hailey; she’s still hiding.” Izabelle was out of breath. The door leading up to the tower was shut, but a twinkle of light under the frame told Izabelle everything she needed to know.

“I HEAR YOU! I’m coming up!” Hunt shouted. BANG. An explosion of plaster ceiling rained down.

“Put the gun down,” Maggie screamed. “You’re such a psycho. The cops are already on their way.” She was bluffing. Izabelle knew they were fifteen miles from the nearest sheriff station. Hunt probably did too. “Quick in a room, shut and lock the doors, hide.”

Izabelle ran for a door.

Nolan ran for a door.

Maggie was last.

Izabelle spotted a small alcove near the window and pulled herself into it. The drapes hung to the floor, and she carefully pulled them to conceal her from view. She dimmed the light on her cell phone and sent a group text to her friends at her old school with the words *HELP, SEND POLICE, GUNMAN IN HOUSE* and her new address. Then she dialed 9-1-1 and slid her phone out into the middle of the room. If Hunt came in and saw her phone, he'd know help was coming.

She heard him stomping up the stairs. One heavy boot at a time. "Ready or not, here I come." He laughed. She remained quiet as a mouse. "Let's see what's behind door number one." Hunt kicked down the door, shattering the old wood.

"Come out, come out wherever you are. I know someone is in here." Hunt stepped into the room. Izabelle felt like her heart might explode. Help would come, it had to. *Help is always there if you ask for it.* Another thing her mom liked to say.

"Help me Sam," Izabelle whispered.

The lights flickered.

Hunt's heavy boots marched into the room. "What's this? A cell phone." Hunt picked it up. Izabelle could make out the faint sound of the 9-1-1 operator on the other line. "You think this is funny? You called the authorities and left the phone here for me to find?" He threw her phone as hard as he could

against the wall, and it shattered. Then the lights started flickering, on and off, over and over.

“Stop that,” Hunt shouted. Something shattered. “Ouch.” Izabelle peaked between the curtains, just a sliver, enough to see a vase flying across the room and hitting Hunt in the head. “Damn it, stop that!” He batted at the air. The lights kept flickering and more things were flying. Books, vases, old pictures off the walls.

It was Sam. He was helping her.

BANG. Hunt started firing the gun wildly. “Stop throwing things at me!” He was furious, but his rage made the ghost of Sam more alive. Izabelle could see a dark shadow approach Hunt from behind. But there were so many things flying around the room, and the lights were flashing like a strobe, it was hard to tell.

“Hunt.”

Hunt spun around and there was another loud BANG.

The lights went dark. The books and vases and pictures all fell to the floor. The house was quiet once more. But in the distance, sirens could be heard.

“Izabelle? Hailey? Nolan?” their mom cried out for them. Izabelle flung open the curtains and watched as Hailey climbed out from the fireplace covered head to toe in black soot.

“Mom, are you okay?” Nolan rushed in from the other room.

“MOMMY!” Hailey joined their embrace and cried.

Izabelle stood still for a moment. The terror of spending the last eight years of their lives running from Hunt was over. His body lay in a pile on the floor.

“Izabelle, get your butt over here,” Maggie demanded. Izabelle walked slowly towards her mom and brother and sister and placed her arms around them.

“Hailey, I thought you were in the tower,” Izabelle said to her sister.

“No, the ghost man told me to get into the fireplace. He said he’d keep me safe from Daddy,” Hailey explained.

“Thank you, Sam,” Izabelle whispered. The lights flickered once.

“MONROE POLICE!” An officer shouted up the stairwell.

“WE ARE UP HERE!” Maggie yelled back. “What do you guys think, after I talk to the police, do you want to go stay at that nice hotel we saw in town– the one with the indoor pool?”

“Yes!” Izabelle, Hailey and Nolan all shouted.

Theo Ate an Ant
- by James Vescovi -

Molly and Theo Rice, who were twins, took swimming lessons with their younger brother Emmett every Friday. The twins were seven; Emmet was six. Their mother, Ellen, took them to the indoor city pool. It was an old pool that had a lion's head in the shallow end. It spit out a jet of warm water, and children loved to stand under it because the water was cold.

After their lesson, the Rice children showered. The pool water had a lot of chlorine. They got dressed, wearing their swimsuits under their light summer clothing. Then they met

their mother.

“Hello you guys,” she said. Her name was Ellen. “Is everyone ready for a treat?”

Ellen Rice always bought her kids something from the pool vending machines. On this day, as usual, Emmett chose a can of soda because swimming made him thirsty. Theo looked closely at the snack machines for a new item he’d never tasted before. He loved to try new snacks.

“Mom, may I have those?” he asked.

He pointed at a package of cinnamon bagel chips. His mother gave him six quarters. He dropped them into the slot and pushed button **B-4**. The bagel chips fell to the bin. He grabbed them and opened the package with his teeth.

“Emmet!” said his mother. “You’re going to lose all your new adult teeth if you open things that way.”

“Sorry, Mama,” he said, stuffing the delicious chips in his mouth.

Molly didn’t get a snack. She wasn’t hungry. Instead, she went to the only machine that didn’t sell food. It belonged to the US Post Office and sold stamps and envelopes. Molly had just learned her home address and wanted to send herself a letter.

Ellen bought her an envelope that had a stamp already

on it. Molly asked for a pen and a scrap of paper. She sat on an old couch next to her brothers.

“What should I write?” she asked Theo.

“Who are you writing a letter to?” he asked.

“Myself.”

“That’s crazy! Why don’t you just tell yourself whatever it is you plan to write?”

“That’s not the point,” she replied. “I want to send a letter. Besides, I don’t know anyone’s address except mine.”

Theo shrugged and said. “Well, I don’t know. Tell yourself what you want for Christmas.”

He didn’t understand how anyone could choose an envelope and a stamp potato chips, candy bars, and gummies—even if they weren’t hungry.

While the Rice children ate, Ellen checked her cell phone messages.

“Mama, what’s our house number again?” asked Molly.

Ellen walked over to her. “Six two three,” she replied.

“If you don’t it will go to the wrong house,” said Emmett. He wiped grape soda from his chin with his swimming towel.

Theo said, “Why won’t the mailman just take the envelope from the mailbox, look at the address on it, and put it back again?”

“Stop teasing me!” said Molly.

Theo stopped eating and said, “Mama, these chips are starting to taste kind of spicy.”

“What do you mean, ‘spicy’,” she asked.

Theo screamed, “*AWWWRGH!* I just ate an ant!”

Ellen walked over, grabbed the package, and looked inside. At least a hundred tiny black ants were crawling around inside. Like Theo, they also loved the cinnamon bagel chips.

“Yuck! Ants!” hollered Theo. “Helllllp! My mouth is on fire!

Ellen grabbed his hand and pulled him to a drinking fountain.

“Spit them out!” she said. “Spit, Theo!”

Theo spit. Little bits bagel chips dotted with ants came out of his mouth. He looked into the sink. None of the ants was moving.

“Theo, now wash your mouth out,” his mother ordered.

But when Theo pushed the water bar, nothing came out. Ellen noticed an OUT OF ORDER sign taped to the wall.

“Mama, I’m going to throw up if don’t get the spicy taste out of my mouth!” cried Theo.

Ellen looked around. She asked, “Emmett, will you please give your brother a sip of your soda pop?”

The boy held the can close to his chest and said, “No, I

don't want to.”

“Emmett, your brother needs to wash the ants out of his mouth.

“Theo never shares with me.”

“Mama, my mouth! My mouth!” yelled Theo.

Ellen finally had to take the can from Emmett. He started crying and said, “But now he’s going to get ants in my soda!”

“Everyone, please be quiet! I’m trying to concentrate over here!” barked Molly.

Ellen gave the can to Theo.

“I don’t like grape,” he complained.

“Drink!” said his mother.

He took a big swallow and spit it out.

“Again!” she said.

“Mom, he’s going to finish my soda!” whined Emmett.

“Please! I need to concentrate!” cried Molly.

Theo finished spitting. He returned the can to Emmett, who put his eye to the opening and said, “You got ants in here! I can see them!”

“Maybe they’re taking swimming lessons,” said Theo, with a big smile.

“That’s not funny!” hollered his brother.

Molly stood up and asked, “Mom, what’s our zip code?”

Emmett had fallen on the floor and was had now having a temper tantrum.

“Is it 49007?” asked Molly. “Or is it 49707? I can’t remember.”

“Is what 49007?” asked Ellen.

“I told you! Our zip code!”

Exhausted from a long, hot day, Ellen was losing her temper. She pulled Emmett to his feet. He was blubbering so hard his legs were like rubber. She finally picked him up and said, “All right, let’s go. Time to go home.”

Ellen took guided her sons down and hall that led to an exit.

“But Mama! Wait! What’s our zip code?!” yelled Molly.

By this time, Ellen was outside. She opened her car door. Theo climbed in, and she strapped Emmett into his car seat.

“Mama, do you think when I brush my teeth tonight more ants will come out?” Theo asked.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” she replied.

Molly was still sitting in the lounge. She was really angry. A tall janitor pushing a bucket came by.

“Sir, do you know what my zip code is?” she asked.

The man stopped. “Where do you live?” he asked.

She held up her envelope. “I live on 623 Windyridge

Street.”

“Well, I live on the other side of town. My zip code is 49002.”

“Should I put that on my envelope?”

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” said the janitor. Then he looked down at the cinnamon bagel chips scattered on the floor.

“Young lady, are those yours?” he asked, pointing to the chips.

“No. They’re my brother’s. But I’ll pick them up for you,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said, walking away with his bucket and mop. “I’m sorry I can’t help you with your zip code.”

Molly sighed. She was angry at Theo for not seeing the ants before he stuffed his mouth with chips. She was angry at Emmett for causing such a fuss over a silly can of grape soda. And she was mad at her mother for not pausing for one second to tell her the zip code.

She bent down and swept up the chips in her hand.

A big, crooked smile went across her face.

She took a chip that was still crawling with ants and dropped it in her envelope.” Then she called down to the janitor: “Excuse me, sir. Is there a mailbox around here?”

He stopped and turned around. “Yes, just go out the

door. There's one right next to the parking lot. It was the door her mother and brothers had left by.

"Thank you!" she called. She licked the envelope and closed it. She dashed outside to the mailbox and froze. Her zip code had like magic popped into her head! She wrote 49707, opened the slot, and dropped it inside.



Ellen Rice honked her horn. As Molly ran to the car, she called over her shoulder to the ants, "See you soon!"

Colony Canine
- by Hunter Spurlock -

Eight years after we left Earth, I saw a dog on my walk home from school. I was cresting the sandy hill that marked the halfway point between our residential pod and the school pod when I saw something out of the corner of my eye. It took me several seconds to realize what I was seeing. I hadn't seen a dog since saying goodbye to Lucky before we left him with the Hendersons and left for the colony. The Hendersons were our neighbors my whole life and it made my mom cry when the old couple told us they decided to stay on Earth and enjoy the time they had left in the home they had always known, but it meant they could take Lucky when we left.

I made a move toward the dog, and it seemed to disappear. I went to where it had been and looked around the mounds of sand for fifteen minutes before I saw the dog standing in the distance again. I started towards the dog again, and again it disappeared at my first step in its direction. I ran home, eager to tell my mother about the dog. I threw the door open and could barely speak.

“Honey,” My mother looked up from her desk startled, “Why are you breathing so hard?”

“I— was—,” I began, labored, “running.”

“What for?” She asked. She moved from behind her desk and left the room. She returned with a can of water and used one hand to guide me to a couch in the corner of her office. I opened the can and took two large gulps. The water was cold and cleared my mouth of the copper taste that had built up.

“Go slow,” she instructed. “You don’t want to catch a cramp.”

“Guess what. I saw a dog today!” I said, without waiting for her to guess.

“Really?” She was skeptical. “Where?”

“On my walk home,” I said and finished the can.

“How do you know it was a dog?”

“Well,” I considered the question, “it looked like a dog.”

“Was anyone with the dog?” she asked and took a seat next to me on the couch.

“No,” I said and looked at the empty can in my hand. Hesitantly, I continued, “I went up to it, but it disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” she repeated and scrunched her face.

“Right,” I said. “It was standing there and then I moved towards it, and it was gone.”

“Honey, it sounds like you just overheated and were seeing things,” she stood and patted my leg. “You need to be more careful. This isn’t Earth. We can’t just run around outside like we could before.”

She stood and refocused on the screens she had been working on when I came in. I went to my room and listened to her recording a video message on a topic I didn’t understand. When my father came home, I heard my mother whispering to him about me. I closed my door when she said I had been seeing things after school and was acting “a little crazy” when I got home. The cold pillows felt good against my face, which had become warm with embarrassment.

After dinner, I went back to my room and was looking through our photo album for a picture of Lucky when my dad knocked on the door. It was open, but he knocked anyway.

“Hey, dad,” I said and set the album on the side table. He

picked it up and began flipping through.

“Mom says you had a weird thing happen after school,” he smiled at the photos of our family on Earth, studying each one hard before moving to the next.

“I guess so,” I began. “I saw a dog on my way home.”

“A dog?” His surprise was practiced and fell flat. “What kind of dog?”

“I don’t know the kinds of dogs, dad,” he turned his attention from the photos and squinted at me.

“Well then, how do you know it was a dog?”

“I just know,” I said, trying to match the tone I always heard him use on his calls for work. No one ever doubted what he said.

“Here’s the thing buddy,” he said and sat on the edge of my bed. “Dogs are kind of a weird subject here in the new colonies.”

“Why?” I was surprised. I hadn’t heard anyone talk about dogs since we left Earth.

“Well,” he began, “See when we moved here, some people had to be left on Earth.” He saw my look of confusion and continued. “There just wasn’t enough room for everyone to come here. There wouldn’t have been enough water or air for everyone.”

“Okay.”

“Well, some of the rich people, the ones who came over early, wanted to pay for their pets to come to the new colonies. A lot of people in government, including me, said that it wouldn’t be right to take a spot from someone and give it to a dog. There are already such limited resources here now, it will take some serious engineering from your generation to make sure that the colonies can keep moving forward at all. With all that in mind, of course we didn’t let them bring their pets. But we weren’t even here two weeks before those awful rumors started coming up and it almost ruined everything we worked so hard to build. Do you see what I’m saying here, son?” I nodded yes, even though I didn’t. He smiled at me and stood to leave.

“But, dad, if the dog is already here...” I trailed off, unsure of myself.

“Goodnight,” he said and closed the door. The stars were moving fast outside my window. I watched them zooming by us as I drifted to sleep and dreamed of Lucky.

The next day, I looked but didn’t see any signs of the dog. When I got home, I went straight to my room and began looking through the library’s document on dogs, which I had gotten from the information hub at school. The tablet I had been

issued was an older model, so all of the pictures were two dimensional and motionless. I read about dogs all afternoon, only stopping when I was called down for dinner. My dad talked through the meal about his job, only acknowledging me to ask if I saw any more animals on my way home. I laughed and finished my food quickly. When the dishes were done, I rushed back to my room and kept reading. When the document ended, I was sure of two things: I had seen a dog and I needed to find it again.

It was over a week before I saw the dog again. This time I stopped and watched it for a long time. The ears were floppy, and the dog was low to the ground. It was an all-black dog with long, straight hair. When I moved towards the dog, careful not to take my eyes off it for a second, it disappeared again. I waited, not moving my eyes from the spot. It reappeared when I offered some leftover snacks from my pocket. The dog devoured the peanut butter crackers and watched closely as I pulled a can of water, a difficult thing to sneak past my mother, from my bag. The water was cold in my cupped hands and the dog's tongue tickled as it drank in rapid fire licks.

The dog had let me feed it, but kept its weight leaned away from me, ready to run at any moment. When the water was all gone, I tried to pet the dog's head, but it disappeared

again. I heard light footsteps and knew it would be a mistake to follow them. The document hadn't said anything about dogs being able to turn invisible, but this must be a breed that the document didn't mention; it was a pretty outdated document. The next day, I fed the dog again and tried to convince it to follow me by smacking my lips together, like the document had described, but the dog stood on the hill like a statue. When I looked back at the dog, it was still watching me and wagging its tail.

That night, at dinner, I asked my father about dogs, careful not to lead with my most burning question. He furled his brow at me, clearly concerned with my interest, but still told me all about his experiences with dogs. Before long he and my mother were telling me about their childhood dogs: Mr. Bean and Sprinkles. They told me about the dogs chewing things up as puppies and all of the times they had escaped the yard and had to be chased home. They were finishing up a story about taking Lucky to a baseball game when I finally worked up the nerve to ask about what I had seen.

"No," My father fought back a laugh as he answered my question. "They can't, I mean couldn't, turn invisible."

"Where did you hear that, honey?" My mom asked.

"One of the kids at school said that's what his dad told

him,” I lied.

“I’ll bet it was Wayne Morris’s kid-” My dad began telling my mom, but I stopped listening.

For the next several weeks, I brought the dog food every day and sat with it on the dark side of the hill. The dog had stopped turning invisible so much and began to wag its tail when it saw me coming. I wanted to name her but was scared that I would be betraying my father. Every afternoon I rushed home from the hill to beat my father, but I worried about her. I worried I wouldn’t see her again. I worried she hadn’t gotten enough to eat and drink. And most of all, I worried that someone else would find her. I visited her every day on the hill, even weekends, until one day she was gone.

A chill ran up my spine and I knew that something was wrong when I could see the top of the hill and she didn’t make herself visible to me. I went to our normal spot, but she wasn’t there. The sand didn’t show any sign of where she went. I sat and waited for her, but she didn’t come back. I made my way back down the hill and heard a soft whimper. The sound was coming from a few hundred yards away and I followed it until I was sure she was right in front of me. The sound of my voice made her appear. She didn’t move as I sat and rubbed her head. She was shaking and nothing I did seemed to help.



After almost an hour of sitting with her, I knew I had to do something. She was clearly in pain, but I wasn't sure what I could do. I picked her up and began walking her towards home. The weight of her made my arms ache so I walked as fast as I could. When our pod was finally visible, her breath had become quick and shallow. The palm reader let me in, and I plopped the dog down on the couch. When my mother demanded to know what was going on, she went invisible. My mother noticed the blood and started searching me for injuries.

“Why do you have blood on you?” My mother’s voice was shaky.

“I don’t know,” I said and began feeling around for a cut. My mother saw the blood beginning to pool on the couch and her tone shifted.

“Where is all of this coming from?” She reached for the blood with a towel that was in her hand and the dog yelped.

“I can explain,” I stuttered, and she cut her eyes at me.

“Good.”

“I told you I saw a dog and then it disappeared,” I began. “It turns out it didn’t disappear; it can turn invisible.” My mother made a noise like she was not impressed with this discovery, but I continued. “She stopped turning invisible after seeing me a bunch of times and knew I gave her some water.”

“So that’s where our extra cans have been going,” My mother said.

“Yes ma’am,” I said and fixed my eyes to the floor to avoid her glance.

“None of this explains why the dog is now bleeding in my office.”

“When I went out to our spot today, she wasn’t there. I was walking home and heard her crying and found her like this. I didn’t know how else to help her, so I brought her here.” My mother turned to look at the pool of blood that was spreading by the moment. Just then, the dog made itself visible and my

mother jumped.

“We have to call your father,” my mom said in an instant.

“No, mom, you can’t,” I said and reached to stop her.

“Why not?” Her confused eyes searched my face.

“Because” I said and began to cry, “then he will do something to her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dad said that dogs weren’t allowed here, and that people would be mad if they knew there was one. I just don’t want anyone to know.”

“Oh, honey,” Her tone changed, and she bent down to hug me. “I think you misunderstood, but right now we need to get help and your father is the only one who can do that.”

I listened to my mother call my father on her computer. She showed him the dog and the blood, and she smiled at me when he said he was rushing home. He had another man with him when he came through the door.

“Where is the dog?” the old man asked. My mother and I led him to the dog and his mouth hung open as I calmed the dog enough to reappear. “I’m going to need your help with this,” he said, and I nodded.

It didn’t take him long to find the source of the bleeding and stitch her up. He told me it was a shame that there were no

more vets in the colonies because I would have made a great one. I smiled and thanked him, embarrassed. The man spoke assuredly to my parents, who sat in the living room quietly while we worked on the dog. He told them what we had seen and what he had done to stop the bleeding. Both of my parents looked at me when the man recommended that we give her plenty of rest the next few days. My father said he would walk the man out and my mother tried to distract me from the whispering in the doorway. I saw my father slip the man something before they shook hands and the old man set out into the night.

When my father came back inside, we ate dinner in silence. He stared into the table like he did when he was lost in thought. When he was done eating, I gathered the dishes with my mom, but he told me to get my coat because we were going for a walk. Nights here were much colder than nights were on Earth, so our walks had become rare since we arrived. I put on my thickest jacket and walked with my father in the direction of the hill. We walked for several minutes before either of us spoke.

“You know,” he began. “When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a zookeeper.”

“What’s a zookeeper?” I asked.

“Zoos used to house different kinds of animals, so that you

could see things like lions and tigers even though you didn't live in their part of the world. Zookeepers were the ones who took care of all the animals," he said.

"Why didn't you do that then?"

"My father wanted me to be an engineer," he said and stopped walking. "You know we can't keep the dog, son?" My face felt suddenly hot, and my eyes fought against the sting of tears.

"Why not?" My voice wavered.

"Because we just can't," he looked into the distance. "We couldn't risk someone knowing we have a dog. It wouldn't look good for a man in my position." We walked in silence again until the house was back in sight.

"It can-"

"She," I corrected.

"Right," he swallowed hard. "She can stay here until she gets better and then she has to be put back out." He didn't ask if I understood and when we were inside, he went straight to bed.

The days with the dog flew by. I taught her how to shake and play dead. We spent every waking moment together. She had gotten so comfortable that she stopped turning invisible even when my dad got home from work. One night I made



her a makeshift collar from an old jacket that had gotten too many holes to wear anymore. I read in the document on dogs that this is where the dog's name plate would go, but I left hers blank because I knew it wasn't right to name her and then make her leave.

When my final day with the dog came, I was heartbroken. I woke up early to spend every moment I could with her. The whole afternoon we laid in my bed on the warmest spot, directly in a beam of sunlight. She didn't seem to notice I cried while brushing out her fur. At dinner, I snuck half of my food away and she ate it in large, sloppy bites. After I brushed my teeth and was laying in my room crying, my father received the call he was expecting from the old man. I heard his booming voice tell my mother that he was taking the conversation to her office. I tried to stay quiet and hear what they were talk-

ing about, but the house seemed silent. Right as the quiet had lulled me to the brink of sleep, my father asked for me to join him on the call.

“Ok he’s in here. Tell the boy what you just told me.”

“I ran some tests on your dog’s blood and found that its DNA is very different from anything we have ever seen.”

“Different how?” I asked. I was aware of my father watching me closely.

“Well, your dog had some interesting protein breakdowns. Along with having the slowest metabolism we have ever seen; your father has been testing my hypothesis for the last few days and it appears the dog you found is almost entirely self-sustained.” the old man droned. I turned and looked at my father confused.

“In English,” my father cut in. “Your dog isn’t a regular dog. It can survive without water and has some other interesting features.”

“How is that possible?” I asked. “The document said –”

“We aren’t sure how this phenomenon is possible,” the old man began, and my father muted him.

“It seems likely that this animal you found is not a dog at all. At least, not one from Earth,” My dad said while squatting down to be eye to eye with me.

“You mean I found an alien?”

“It seems that way,” my dad chuckled. “I’m not sure how we missed it on our initial sweeps or how it– I mean she– got inside our colony pod.” My father said and was interrupted by my mother, now standing in the doorway, clearing her throat. He continued, “anyway the important thing is she isn’t a drain on our resources.”

“And?” my mother asked.

“And you can keep her.” I threw my arms around my father’s neck and felt his body release as he hugged me back.

“It also means,” the old man said when my father unmutted him again, “she will likely outlive all of us. Her metabolism seems to be more like that of an elephant or sea turtle than the dogs we are familiar with from Earth.”

Over the next several months, my father used satellites to help the government find even more dogs like mine. They had been living amongst us the whole time and no one had noticed. It took a while, but eventually the population got used to the idea of these new pets and they became a staple of every pod in the colony. Our colony even became a destination for other colonies to come and adopt pets; my father was given a medal for his discovery and the business it brought to the colony. The other man got to return to his true calling – being a vet, until

one day he got too old and needed someone to take over the business. I had been his helper for a year and didn't feel ready but with my sweet Emilia by my side every day, tail wagging and tongue out, I knew anything was possible.



No One Told Me I Couldn't

- by Liz Lydic -

I'm having a really, really hard time choosing between my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch and my Barbie with pink hair whose name is Barbinia. That's not really her name but I call her that. I call her that because I have nine Barbies, and when I was four, I called all of them 'Barbie' but now I'm six and three-quarters, and I'm more of a big girl and my mom said I'm responsible enough to name my toys anything I want. 'Responsible' means I'm in charge of that thing my mom tells me to do, or the thing that is mine. I named the pink hair Barbie Barbinia because it sounds fancy. If I choose Barbinia, it will

break up the Barbie band, and her friends might miss her. I would miss my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch, BUT I know Mommy's friend would love it. Grown-ups like watches so they aren't late for meetings and doctor appointments.



My Grandma Lilah showed me her watch once and showed me that it has an alarm on it for when to take pills and how many miles she walks. My unicorn snap bracelet real action watch doesn't have those, but it is still super special to me because my best friend in the world Jade gave it to me. Grandma Lilah bought her own watch, from Amazon. I asked her how come she didn't get it from a best friend, and she told me grown-ups don't usually buy things like watches for friends

that often.

“What’s ‘often’? I asked Grandma Lilah.

“It means something that happens a lot.”

“So, you mean your friends do buy you a watch sometimes but not a lot?”

Grandma Lilah did a laugh then, and I saw her silver teeth. Mommy told me I can’t ask Grandma Lilah about her teeth anymore. Then, Grandma Lilah said when you’re a grown up, you usually have your own ideas about the things you like and use, so usually your friends don’t give you things like watches and clothes for gifts.

“What do they give you, then?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Gift cards, like money, so you can pick out what you like.”

I didn’t know what to say back about that, because it sounded boring, but I knew if I said that, even if it’s the truth, that I’d be in trouble for using a rude word. Instead, I said “I’m glad Jade gave me this unicorn snap bracelet real action watch instead of a gift card.” I think that was ok to say.

“What’s your favorite thing about it, Maggie?” Grandma Lilah asked, in a voice like a teacher.

I looked at my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch. It has a unicorn around the numbers part with an actual mane.

Well, not an actual, actual mane, because it's plastic, not real unicorn hair, but it's rainbow, and it makes the watch beautiful and special. I felt the bumpy mane part. I like to touch the mane when I don't feel like smiling. I think it calms me down, because I feel less in the red zone when I do that. When Jade gave it to me on my sixth birthday, I was excited because I know she loves unicorns because they are special and hard to find, and if she gave me one, maybe she thinks I'm special, too.

I thought Grandma Lilah wanted more of a grown-up answer, so I told her I like about it that it tells me the time and helps me to know when my Daddy is coming to pick me up on Fridays and what time I go back to Mommy's on Sundays. Grandma Lilah's mouth went small when I said that. I was confused why she didn't smile, so I thought it was a wrong answer.

"Actually, what I like about it is I can take it with me anywhere and I can always remember that Jade gave it to me because she thinks I'm special," I told her. Grandma Lilah smiled then, but not a big enough smile for silver teeth.

"How sweet," she said.

"Do you have any candy?" I asked, since the word 'sweet' reminded me of the candies Grandma Lilah has sometimes. She explained that they're not real candies, but cough drops,

but I still like the flavor at first of them. I thought about the yucky flavor they have underneath, and I put my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch up to my ear to hear its ticking. It's kind of like music, I think sometimes. I like it. Sometimes I can hear only the ticking and not anything else. If someone in my class asks me why I'm listening to the ticking, I tell them I'm actually getting a secret signal that only I can hear. Usually, they think that's cool and don't ask me about the listening again.

I do that not-truth, too, about talking to my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch, which I do when I can't find anyone to play with me. If someone - usually a bully boy like Dustin or Ty - asks me why I'm talking to my watch, I tell them I have a secret special watch that can hear my words and send a message out. When I say these things, I'm not telling a not-truth on purpose, I'm just answering the question the way I need to.

But sometimes I do think I have a special power with my watch, since it always makes me feel better. This is why I think its special power with me *is* a real truth. Since I know this is my most special thing, that's why I want to give it to my mommy's special friend. One time, Mrs. Hong read us a story about a girl that had a pen pal, which is when you write a letter to someone

you never meet but become friends with them anyway. Since the story had a girl that did that, and Mrs. Hong said pen pals are special, I know it's ok to give a gift to someone I've never met.

I can't reach the wrapping paper in the hallway closet, and besides, I don't want Mommy to know what I'm doing until I'm done. I need to find something to put my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch in so I can give it to Mommy's special friend.

I look through my toy shelves and try a tiny jewelry box, and then a container my Uno card game is in, but both are too small. I leave the dumped-out Uno cards to clean up later, and just get a piece of red construction paper from my art supplies shelf. Red is my favorite color, but I don't know if it's Mommy's special friend's favorite color. I only know that Mommy's special friend is a boy and that he's kind and smart. I know this because usually Mommy tells me "Don't worry about it" when I ask her about him. She says, "I'm here with you right now, so let's focus on that."

But, one time, she checked me out a new library book, and I asked her why she wanted to read me 'The Lorax' that she had checked out and she said she was curious about it because it was her special friend's favorite book when he was

little. I asked her a bunch of questions about him, and most of them she told me the “Don’t worry about it” thing, but then she said I could ask one - just one - question and she would answer it for real, and so, I said “What do you like most about your special friend?” ‘cause I needed to make sure she didn’t say any of the things she says are her favorite things about me, like my curiosity, courage and cuteness, ‘the three C’s of Magg-ie’ she says, and then looks right at me and puts her arm around me, pinching my shoulder just a little so I feel safe.

“Well, he’s kind and smart. And he knows how important you are to me.” She bopped her nose on mine like we do, and then got up. I asked her what his favorite color is and who his best friend is, but she interrupted - which I am not allowed to do - and said “Nope, don’t worry about that. Do you want PB&J or a bean burrito for lunch?”

I get another piece of red construction paper out, because red is my favorite color, AND because it reminds me of kindness and smartness. I crinkle one of the papers around my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch, and tape it in a few places. Getting the tape out of the tape thing frustrates me, and I go to put my finger on the unicorn mane to calm down, but then I realize I won’t be able to do that anymore, that my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch is getting wrapped

and I'm going to give it to Mommy's special friend. *Oh, I think to myself. That's ok. Mommy's special friend is special, and I want him to use the mane to calm down.* The wrapped gift looks messy. I don't know what to do. I feel ruined. I might have to ask Mommy for help, but then she'll know about this surprise. I turn the gift around and the other side of it doesn't look as lumpy. *Ok, I think.* I get out my favorite Sharpie that gives me my best handwriting, and I lay on my brown hard floor in front of the other piece of red construction paper. While I think of what to say, I draw lines on my other hand, and tiny ones on the floor, which later I'll see if Mommy notices. I hear the ticking of my unicorn snap bracelet real action watch inside the wrapped gift, and I feel it like music in my heart.



Dear Mommy's Special Friend, Thank you for being kind and smart to my mom. She feels happy. Here is my watch. You can have it. I hope you have a happy day.

I'm tired from writing that, and both sides of the paper get filled before I can write the last sentence I thought of: 'I hope I can meet you one day.' But I decide not to worry about that.

To the Top
- by Peter J Barbour -

As the bike flew down the hill, Jonah's shoulders hunched over the handlebars. Pedaling furiously at a speed on the verge of losing control, air whisked by his face. At the bottom of the slope, he hit the brake hard and slid his back tire out from behind him. A cloud of dust flew up from the gravel-covered asphalt as he skidded to rest next to Aiden.

"Are you really going to climb Big Mike?" said Aiden, Jonah's best friend.

"Yep, my brother, Will, did it when he was twelve. I'm ten. That would make me the youngest ever."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid," Jonah reflected stroking his chin, "interesting word. Nope, not afraid." *Never admit to feeling fear, that's what*

Will says, even if that's what you feel.

The boys surveyed their surroundings to be sure they wouldn't be seen before entering the forbidden space, a wooded area, on the edge of a golf course, guarded by mounted police, the Parkies. It was out-of-bounds for the golfers, and off-limits to the neighborhood kids.

Grand trees grew in the grove, some hundreds of years old, covered by vines of kudzu that hung from limbs like long flowing capes. Jonah uncrossed his arms and tapped his back pocket where a pair of old leather gloves used for climbing trees stuck out.

Jonah re-mounting his bike, scanned the surroundings again for Parkies, and headed into the woods. Aiden hesitated, then followed. They rode until they arrived at the tallest of the tall, a humongous pine tree, called Big Mike.

"Today is the day," Jonah said and sat on a rock, tilted his head back slowly tracing the trunk up until he nearly toppled over onto his back. Moving his arms, he imagined



pulling himself up limb by limb as he planned his journey to the top.

The first branch, thick and sturdy, dangled eight feet above them. Other branches arranged themselves like a great spiral staircase up the trunk.



Aiden kept an eye out for Parkies while Jonah leaped at the lowest limb but fell short. He jumped again and missed. Kudzu vines hanging from the branch failed to support his weight.

“I’m only four and a half feet tall. How do I reach the first branch?” Jonah said. He patted the tree’s rough, thick trunk, hoping not to have offended Big Mike by complaining.

“I got it. How about a ladder. My dad keeps one in the garage,” Aiden suggested.

“Let’s pile stones at the base, and I’ll climb them like steps,” Jonah said.

“Too much work,” Aiden responded. “Maybe, if you can’t reach the first limb, you’re not supposed to climb Big Mike.”

Matt appeared as he rounded the curve in the path.

“Hey, Jonah, your mom’s looking for you. She said you better not be playing in the woods, and she won’t bring you home from the Parky station if you get caught again. You have your phone with you? She sent you a message.”

“Battery’s dead.” Jonah gritted his teeth and growled. “I’m going to climb this tree.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Help me up to the first branch. You and Aiden stand next to the tree. Make a sling with your hands and launch me.”

The boys strained as they raised Jonah as high as they could. Jonah still missed the mark.

“I think you better go home like your mother asked,” Aiden said. Matt agreed.

“Let me use your phone. I’ll text her,” Jonah said.

A rustling in the bushes caught Jonah’s attention. Owen emerged.

“You guys called a meeting. Nobody told me,” Owen said. His t-shirt read, “I Destroy Silence.”

“Jonah thinks he can climb Big Mike,” Aiden said.

“No way,” said Owen. “BTW Jonah, your mother is looking for you.”

Jonah frowned. “I know.”

The four boys spun around, alerted by the sound of voices. Ella, Drew, and Zoey appeared.

“Jonah is going to climb Big Mike,” Owen announced.

“Right,” Ella said in a snarky tone. “Oh, yeah, Jonah, your mother wants you home. She knows you are here, and she said you don’t want to make her come down here to fetch you.”

Jonah waved Ella off. *I’m climbing this tree. The whole neighborhood is here. I can’t wimp out now.*

“How are you going to reach the first limb, Spiderman?” Ella mocked.

“We can make a people tower. Jonah can climb on top and grab the branch,” Matt suggested.

Owen and Drew got down on their knees, and Aiden and Zoey climbed onto their backs. Matt and Ella scooted atop

Zoey and Aiden. The tower swayed. Jonah pulled himself to the top, stood leaning on Big Mike. Stretching to his limit, his hands barely touched the branch. He extended a little farther and lunged.

Drew collapsed. Bodies toppled onto soft pine needles and leaves.

His fingertips clutched the branch, Jonah swung his legs back and forth, wrapped himself around the bough, then pulled himself to a sitting position, and reached for a branch above him. Owen pumped his fist. Jonah took a deep breath, put on his gloves, and thrust out his chest. Before starting to climb up, he looked down.

“I’m taking bets,” Ella declared, swept her hair back, and made it into a ponytail, secured with a scrunchie she pulled from a pocket. “I say he doesn’t even make it halfway.”

“Watch me now,” Jonah shouted.

He tested each limb before moving up to the next branch, and the next, and the next. Keeping his feet close to the trunk, the larger thick limbs supported him well, but the pine’s short branches proved brittle. Sap made his gloves sticky and covered his shirt and pants. A strong pine scent enveloped him.

Halfway up Big Mike, Jonah glanced down. His friends appeared small, distant, far away. He grabbed the branch clos-

est to him. His head spun, legs became weak, threatening to buckle. Jonah sat down with his back against the trunk, gripped the limb with his thighs like a vice. He turned his gaze to the horizon. *Feel no fear.* His heart slowed. Calmer, he resumed his climb.

As he rose into the sky, his confidence returned. Big Mike's trunk narrowed and swayed with the wind. Jonah peered out onto the tops of other trees, none as tall as Big Mike.

At the top, he found the branches thin and pliable but strong enough to hold him. Arms clinging to a slim branch, he gently rocked back and forth. *I'm soaring like the birds.*

Lost in his reverie, smiling at his accomplishment, he held on with his legs, released his hold, and reached for the sky. A river flowed south in the distance and green fairways spread out beyond the forest. "Awesome," he said. A tingle ran down his spine.

A clammer of distant voices from the ground brought him back to the reality of his situation. He still had to climb down.

Jonah froze. From the forest floor, he heard a familiar voice, and it wasn't pleasant.

"Where's Jonah?" his mother demanded; her annoyance unmistakable. Jonah watched from above.

“Up there, Mrs. Jackson.” Aiden pointed to the treetop.

“Get down this minute, Jonah Alloysius Jackson!” Mrs. Jackson shouted, voice commanding and shrill.

Jonah tightened his grip on the trunk. Heart racing, breathing faster, he couldn't move. The wind picked up, and the tree groaned as it swayed. Bright sunlight bathed him, but, in the distance, the sky darkened. He spotted Parkies heading for the stable. Golfers abandoned the course as a siren sounded. A wave of cool air chilled him. An earthy sharp odor, like bleach, wafted over him. In the distance, a flash of lightning lit up the approaching clouds.

“Come down, now!” Jonah's mother shouted. She paced back and forth wringing her hands.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Jonah moved, carefully reaching for a branch below him and lowered himself. He lost his grip and slid to a lower limb, just able to hold on. A collective gasp rose from the ground. Branch by branch, he transferred his weight ignoring his fear.

Thunder became louder, the sky above him darkening. Raindrops started to fall. His grasp, less secure, he slipped, toppling out of control. He grabbed at branches as he passed through the limbs, but one snapped after another.

“Jonah!” his mother screamed.

Jonah caught himself in the kudzu, stopping his fall. More concerned about the storm, than the height, or his mother standing at the base of Big Mike, he quickly reached the lowest limb and swung down to the ground.

His mother's face was no longer pale, now red, lips pursed, arms waving. Wind-whipped rain pelted them. Lightning cracked above followed by thunder only a few seconds later.

"Let's hurry home," Mrs. Jackson said and shook her finger at Jonah. "I'm not finished with you, young man."

Jonah, bruised and scratched, covered in pine tar, grabbed his bike. His mother led, his friends in tow as they rushed home.

The sky lit up. A loud crack and thunder exploded behind them. Big Mike split and burst into flames.

Out of the woods, running through the pouring rain, Jonah looked back and waved goodbye to Big Mike. *I'm the last to climb Big Mike, and no one can top me now.*

The Adventures of Dolly Day-Dream

- by Dean Flowerfield -

Delilah Worthington Jones, nine years old, with tight black curls and big brown eyes, lived on a farm. For most children, this would have been a delight. To wake up early each morning just as the sun pushes its round, bald head over the hill, to smell the crocuses and new-mown hay, to milk the cows and feed the chickens and hear the mooing and the clucking --- what could possibly be finer? But to Delilah, it was gloomy. For, you see, the farm that belonged to her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Worthington Jones, was miles and miles from any city. It was miles and miles from any town or village. In fact, it lay nestled on the edge of Nowhere, miles and miles from Anybody or Anywhere. So, there were no neighborhood children for Delilah to play with and her parents taught her school lessons at

home. To complicate things further, the Worthington Joneses had no other sons or daughters, and this left Delilah all alone. She longed for a playmate. Just someone --- anyone --- to keep her company. The smell of the crocuses and the new-mown hay was alright, of course, but it could hardly keep you company. The cows and chickens were alright too, but just how much mooing and clucking could a nine-year-old girl put up with? Delilah was bored and unhappy. Every day was the same and every day was one that passed her by. Up at six in the morning, brush teeth, wash face, over to the chicken coop, milk the cows.... And so, it went on until the afternoon when there were no more chores to do, and her time was free. But free to do what?

Delilah spent most summer afternoons up in the hayloft where she could stretch herself out in the hay and wiggle and squirm until she found the best position in which to be bored. She'd close her big brown eyes and just lie there --- hay in her shoes, hay on her dress, hay all tangled and knotted in her black curls. Then she'd begin to wish. Over and over again, she'd say to herself: I wish I had somewhere lovely to go. I wish I had someone to play with. I wish, I wish, I wish. She really didn't know why she spent *all* afternoon of every day wishing to herself like this. Yet it was easy to see that in her

secret heart, the one that sometimes only others can perceive, she believed that somehow her very wishing might make her wishes come true. But it didn't happen and, in time, her belief began to fade. A summer full of unfulfilled wishes can break even a secret heart and dim even the deepest wishes.



One afternoon in late August, though, when the sun was its hottest and Delilah was lonelier than she had ever been before, something wonderful *did* happen. It isn't clear why it happened on just that day and not the day before or the day after, but it did. Maybe it was because on that day Delilah had definitely decided to give up hope and stop her foolish wishing. To escape the unrelenting heat, she dragged herself over to the

barn as usual and climbed into the cool of the loft, where she lay her head on the hay and tried not to wish. But Delilah was so used to wishing that she found not wishing very difficult to do. In fact, try as she might, she just couldn't *stop* wishing. One thought stuck in her mind and refused to be dislodged: the image of a field full of roses. She didn't know what it meant or even if it meant anything in particular, but there it was in her head: roses, roses, roses --- everywhere. Delilah tried so hard to stop thinking of roses that she nearly burst a blood vessel, but it was no use. The harder she tried, the more intense her vision of roses became. Finally, when the struggle within her reached a peak, it happened. All of a sudden, there she was, right in the middle of the Land of Roses, where there were roses everywhere. Roses of all colors and kinds and shapes and not a thorn on any of them. Her wish had come true, and her wishing had made it so!

At first, Delilah was too startled to know what to do but she soon recovered her composure and began running and dancing about through the Land of Roses, picking bouquets, twinning roses in her hair, and strewing flowers left and right. Hours later, when only the tippy top of the sun was visible over the hill, Delilah grew tired and lonely again and sat down on a bed of ferns, feeling as though she was going to cry. "I wish I were

home,” she whimpered, and before a single tear had a chance to come to her eyes, she found herself back in the hayloft. It had been a wonderful day.

The next few afternoons, Delilah spent in the Land of Roses, returning to the loft whenever she wished. After several days, she discovered that as long as she was snuggled away alone in the hay, she could make any of her dreams come true. She had only to wish for a thing and there it was in the Land of Roses. When she finally discovered the significance of so singular a power, she sat straight up in the hay and declared:

“In the mornings when I milk the cows and feed the chickens, I may be just plain old Delilah Worthington Jones but in the afternoons I’m quite a different girl. For the afternoons, I need a different name. I shall call myself Dolly Day-Dream.” From then on, every day at twelve o’clock when her chores were finished Delilah Worthington Jones climbed into the hayloft to dream the dreams and wish the wishes and lead the life of Dolly Day-Dream.

After a week or so, Dolly became bored with only flowers for company and regretted that her first wish had not been for a group of friends to play with. And, just as you might suspect, no sooner had she made this wish than a group of children appeared around her, boys and girls of different ages and

dispositions. Dolly was so happy that she took their hands and danced with each of them, one by one. There was Lotty Light-Heart and Sammy Sourface and Timmy Timaditty. There was Harry Contrary and Wanda Wisdom, Gilda Giggles and Peter Please-ta-Meetcha. Each of them was a little like their name. And each was a little like Dolly herself, though she couldn't say which one of them resembled her most.

Lotty Light-Heart was always happy. You never saw her when there wasn't a sweet smile on her face and a rose in her hair. She was a delight to be with and agreeable to all. When Lotty was around, everyone was in a good mood. Or almost everyone.

Harry Contrary was another story. No matter what any of the children wanted, Harry disagreed. If Lotty wanted to dance, Harry wanted to sing. If Lotty replied that they could dance *and* sing, Harry said he didn't want to do either. If anyone agreed to what Harry suggested, he would sometimes go off in a corner and pout.

But Harry wasn't quite as unmanageable as he might seem. Wanda Wisdom, who was the oldest of the children and almost as mature as a grownup, taught the others how to manage him. "Just keep suggesting things you *don't* want to do and soon Harry Contrary will insist on something you *do*

want to do. Then you can just do it,” she declared.

Sammy Sourface was something of a mystery. Although he was a perfectly pleasant fellow when you got to know him, Sammy always walked around with his face scrunched up as though he had just taken a big bite of a lemon or smelled a dreadful smell, like a rotten egg or dog doo. None of the children, including Dolly, could figure out why.

Sammy’s closest friend, Timmy Timaditty, who always tagged along at Sammy’s side, was the shyest boy in the entire world. Almost anything tended to frighten him, and you had to be careful not to shout, for fear that he would jump in alarm. Timmy was especially shy about meeting new people. Whenever he was introduced to someone, he would look down at his feet and never directly into the person’s eyes.



Dolly's two other friends, Gilda Giggles and Peter Pleased-ta-Meetcha, were somewhat alike. Peter was the most gregarious, outgoing boy you'd ever hope to meet, and Gilda the most tittering, giggliest girl. No matter what any of the other children said, even something as ordinary as "Nice morning, isn't it?" Gilda would burst out into uncontrollable giggles and Peter would rush up and shake their hand and say, "Pleased-ta-Meetcha, Pleased-ta-Meetcha. Wanna play?"

Such were the friends of Dolly Day-Dream. With each other's help, the kids who had problems managed to work them out. Harry Contrary eventually realized that he wasn't making any friends by being so negative and, after a long talk with Wanda Wisdom, he decided to change his ways and be more agreeable. I don't know exactly what brought about this change, whether it was Wanda's wonderful Wisdom or simply the marvelously transformative atmosphere of the Land of Roses, but I do know that it wasn't long before the kids started calling him Harmonious Harry instead of Harry Contrary. This caused him to wear a big smile and say yes to just about everything.

Sammy Sourface's problem was easy to solve. After playing with him for a while, Dolly realized that he wasn't actually in a bad mood, as his grumpy look seemed to suggest. In fact, he

was easy to get along with and a lot of fun. He'd cooperate in games, and he hardly ever complained. His sour face was just an unfortunate habit he'd picked up somewhere along the way. Sammy didn't even realize he had a sour face!

"Why are you making a sour face, Sammy?" asked Dolly. "You haven't bitten into a lemon lately and there's no dog doo anywhere in the Land of Roses."

"What are you talking about? I'm not making a sour face," Sammy replied.

"Oh yes you are," said Dolly. "Just look in the mirror." When he did, Sammy was astonished and said he'd never scrunch up his face again. It wasn't easy at first because old habits can be hard to break. But every time he made a sour face, Dolly gently reminded him: "Hey Sammy: No lemons, no dog doo," and Sammy would laugh and laugh until eventually he didn't need to be reminded at all.

Gilda Giggles and Peter Pleased-ta-Meetcha solved Timmy Timaditty's problem. It took some time because shyness isn't easily overcome but with Gilda's and Peter's help Timmy grew less fearful and much less reluctant to greet new people. Gilda took him by the hand and whenever they encountered something that made Sammy feel afraid or shy, Gilda giggled away at it until Timmy began to see that it wasn't intimidating

at all. Peter taught Timmy how to fearlessly meet people.

“Just stick out your hand and smile and say in your friendliest voice, ‘My name is Timmy. Pleased-ta-Meetcha, Pleased-ta-Meetcha’ --- and they’ll love ya, I promise.”

“But I can’t,” Timmy would moan, “I just can’t.”

“Oh yes you can. Look ‘em straight in the eye and smile. Like this.”

And Peter would walk up to the first new person they saw and demonstrate the technique. Before long, he got Timmy to do the same, at first with hesitation but eventually more confidently.

Gilda and Peter didn’t really have what you could call a problem. They were each just a little too outgoing, too rambunctious, which is the kind of thing that naturally diminishes as kids grow up and mature, as it eventually did with each of them.

Once their problems were solved everyone was blissfully happy in the Land of Roses. There was a lot more wishing and a lot more fun. I’ve neither the time nor energy to tell you about all of the wishing or all of the fun, for Dolly’s wishes were never-ending and each day brought something new and exciting. I will tell you this, though. On the twelfth day, Dolly wished for a pond for the children to swim in, and immediately

there appeared a fragrant lake that the kids christened the Cinnamon Sea because of the distinct taste of cinnamon in the water. On the fifteenth day, to fill the bellies of her hungry playmates, she wished for ice cream. In this case, Dolly must have wished extra hard because there appeared an entire *mountain* of ice cream as tall as a five-story building, every story a different flavor --- chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, peppermint, and butter brickle. When the children discovered that Ice Cream Mountain didn't melt in the heat like other ice cream, they climbed to the top and used it as a big slide, pausing along the way to taste their favorite flavors and then tumbling down into a soft bed of rose petals that lay at its base.

That was all more than a year ago. Delilah is still living on that farm nestled on the edge of Nowhere, miles and miles from Anybody and Anywhere. There are still no children in the neighborhood and the Worthington Joneses have not had any more sons or daughters. Some friends of her family told me recently that they worried that Delilah must be very bored and lonely because she has only her chores to do and no one to play with. But when I heard this, I merely smiled to myself. For I knew that she wasn't bored or lonely at all. She was happily living the life of Dolly Day-Dream, playing with Wanda Wisdom

and Peter Pleased-ta-Meetcha and the rest of the gang --- swimming and splashing in Cinnamon Sea, slipping and sliding down Ice Cream Mountain or just pleasantly strolling through the Land of Roses.



