

SCSC WRITING CONTEST

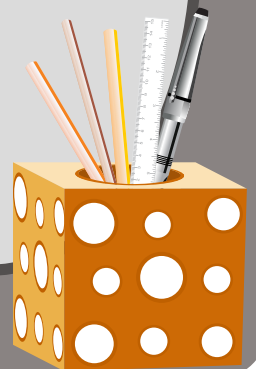
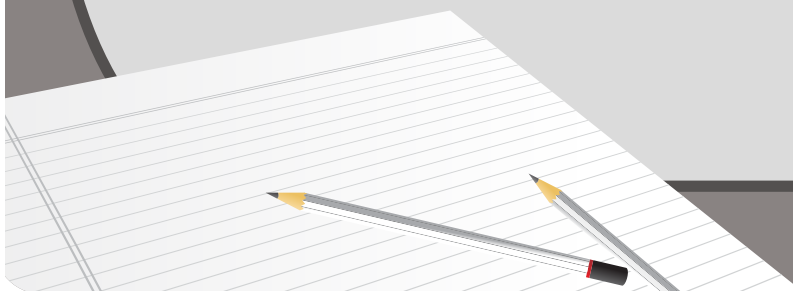
For Students in Grades K–12

**2019–20 Theme:
*Rights & Responsibilities***

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

The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the sponsors.

Note to Readers: Some of the works may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.

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CATEGORY DESCRIPTIONS:

Poetry:

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

- Limit three entries per student
- Maximum length is two pages, double-spaced per entry

Fiction (Imaginary/Fantasy):

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

- Limit three entries per student
- Maximum length is five pages, double-spaced per entry

Non-Fiction (True/Factual):

(Choose one or more non-fiction types)

Personal narrative: A true story that describes a real event or experiences in the author's life.

Information: Factual writing to convey knowledge of a topic and research findings.

Essay/Opinion: A feeling or thought you have about a subject or topic, supported by research.

- Limit three entries per student
- Maximum length is five pages, double-spaced per entry

All entries should relate to the 2019–20 theme: Rights & Responsibilities.

Right: *just, good, proper, standard, fact, truth*

Responsibility: *accountable, reliable, dependable, complete and obligation*

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

To the staff at South Central Service Cooperative for promoting the contest, gathering and cataloging submissions, serving as judges and providing feedback to students, and designing the anthology layout.

To the students and staff at Minnesota State University, Mankato education department for their support while transitioning to distance learning within their programs.

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

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

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

Table of Contents

POETRY

<i>The Eldest Sister, Norah Davis</i>	3
<i>Open Minded, Olivia Graddy</i>	3
<i>Loving Me, Anna Woods</i>	3
<i>Rescue Boat, Anna Woods</i>	4
<i>Untouchable, Anna Woods</i>	4

FICTION

<i>Life and Death, Brielle Brown</i>	5-7
<i>Wow!, Scarlett Chance</i>	7-8
<i>Lesson Across the Street, Autumn Gaul and Evie Johnson</i>	8-11
<i>The Party, Brennan Glawe</i>	11-13
<i>The Thieves' Hold, Ethan Gordon</i>	13-15
<i>A Long Way from the Farm, Olivia Graddy</i>	16-19
<i>Mayday, Lulu Gray</i>	19-20
<i>Dragon Sales, Riley Holets</i>	21-22
<i>The Dragon's Keep, Riley Holets</i>	22-24
<i>The Mother and the Fae, Riley Holets</i>	24-26
<i>If You Get a Hamburger at McDonald's, Andree Jakovice</i>	26
<i>Time Twist, Cameron Johnson</i>	27-28
<i>Responsibilities First!, Katrin Loftin</i>	28-29
<i>Everyone Should Have a Home, Keisha Navarrete</i>	29-30
<i>All Are Home, Leah Proehl</i>	31-33
<i>The Road Trip, Claire Roering</i>	33-36
<i>The Bell Tower, Andie Sanderson</i>	37-38
<i>Emily's Essay Experience, Peyton Seeger</i>	39-41
<i>A Garden of Learning, Nityan Sharma</i>	41-42
<i>A Perpetual Tussle, Rohan Sharma</i>	42-44
<i>Homework and School, Nora Ann Smith</i>	44-50
<i>Lindzi and Her Magic Bunny, Reagan Steffen</i>	50-52
<i>Homework and Home, Olivia Trotman</i>	52-55
<i>Regina's Pet Pandemonium, Sophia Williams</i>	55-56

NONFICTION

<i>Buddy, Ava Boswell</i>	57
<i>Getting a Dog, Sofia Fritzke</i>	58
<i>Poisoned Water, Brennan Gerstbauer</i>	58
<i>Follow Me Today, For Tomorrow, Sasha Jakovich</i>	59
<i>State Story, Sophia Matarrese</i>	59-61

ABOUT THE AUTHORS	62-63
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POETRY

The Eldest Sister

By Norah Davis, Grade 6
Maple River Middle School, Mapleton

First there was one daughter,
Then two,
Then three,
Then four.
I am the oldest,
Sometimes I feel like a protector,
Watching over my younger sisters.
Every morning I wake them up,
Help them get ready,
And then get on the bus.
Sometimes I bring them treats home from my school,
Cookies with chocolate chips,
Sweet fizzy juice,
Or chewy fruit snacks.
Sometimes they make me mad by,
Stealing my stuff,
Drawing on my papers,
And tearing my homework.
But even though,
They make me mad,
I still love them with all my heart,
For I am the eldest sister.

Open Minded

By Olivia Graddy, Grade 3
Eagle View Elementary, New Prague

I have a closed mind.
I am not creative.
I am not original.
My mind is not free.
I don't talk because I don't know
the right words to say.
But then something bright comes in.
A change comes.
Something beautiful.
The change does something.
It opens my closed door.
I feel wonderful and free.
I feel artistic and imaginative.
I am INSPIRED.
I can do anything.

loving me

By Anna Woods, Grade 10
St. Peter High School, St. Peter

the self-harm scars show how much i was hurting
turning pain into cuts
the permanent ink placed on my hip
a constant reminder of my first love
the uneven bangs framing my face
cut impulsively during a breakdown
the slit in my right eyebrow
made to show that i wanted change
the visible weight gain i so wish would disappear
showing my recovery
and how i began eating better
there are days i'd gladly change my appearance
then i remember
my body represents my experiences
it shows how strong i am
and how strong i can be
i love it
i can see the sad effects of poor mental health
and then the aftermath of building myself back up

rescue boat

By Anna Woods, Grade 10
St. Peter High School, St. Peter

coming back from the fall
is like relearning to breathe
once you start to drown
you don't expect you'll float back up for air
my emotions had engulfed me
the overwhelming urge to stay below had overcome me
they tried to pull me up
but i pushed them away
as i sunk deeper and deeper and deeper
i acclimated to the cold and lonely waters around me
as i gasped in the icy water
for a minute my mind was at peace
soon i wouldn't feel sad
i wouldn't have to cry myself to sleep again
the pain would be gone
quickly that sense of peace left
as fast as day turns to night
the fear crept in and took place of the peace
i wasn't ready to leave behind my home
my family
i wasn't ready to throw away everything i'd worked toward
all my dreams i so desperately wanted to achieve
I couldn't give those up
as i clawed at the water
trying so desperately to reach the top
my mind raced
i saw the surface getting brighter
i saw my rescue boat floating above
my chance to breathe again was at my fingertips
as i burst through the barrier keeping me from air
i was grabbed by my rescuers
and wrapped in their warm loving arms
my lungs began filling with air
slowly i began recovering
putting my broken pieces back together
and seeing what life truly is
beautiful.
as the boat reached shore
they carried me to the sand
there i realized how strong i truly was
eternally grateful i am
for my rescue boat
and for the ones who pulled me back up
it was because of them
that i realized how strong i am

untouchable

By Anna Woods, Grade 10
St. Peter High School, St. Peter

i want to love you
i want you to love me
the hardest thing i'd ever beared was losing you
so many of the tears that fell from my eyes
were tears that should have been wiped by you
but you're now the untouchable human
ill forever want to be wrapped in
how do i push aside the strongest love i've ever felt
and have yet to forget
how am i supposed to act
like my fondest memories weren't of you
my favorite stories are about you
and the many adventures we took
and now it's too painful to remember
let alone tell them
when my children ask about my first love,
our story will be the one i tell
i still hold you so close to my heart
and i don't understand why
you're untouchable
no matter how much i want you,
no matter how hard i try to regain your attention
it will never be the same
our love is still my favorite story to tell
my dreams are still filled with you
and the experiences i'll forever wish we could have had.
i love you..
scratch that. i loved you

FICTION

Life and Death

By Brielle Brown, Grade 5

Maple River West Elementary, Good Thunder

I sat numbly outside in the hall. My stepfather walked out and touched my hand.

"Do you want to see her?" he said.

"What?! She's dead, isn't she?" I said. His face looked confused for a moment, then a wave of understanding swept over his face.

"No, no she's not dead, Nevaeh. Just a bit mangled." he replied. Wow, he sure has a way of understating things. "She wants to see you," he said. I get up and walk into her room. The monitor goes beep, beep. I can practically hear the IV dripping its fluids into her.

"Mom?" I ask. "What's wrong with you? When are you gonna get better?" The pains had started a few days ago, and then the bleeding, and then... Then Robert, my stepfather took her to the hospital and... I don't know anything else.

"Oh, Nevaeh, it's... it's..." She bursts into loud, suppressed sobs.

"Mom, stop! Please, stop! You're scaring me!" I cried.

"It's so unfair! Nevaeh, it's melanoma. It's this terrible type of skin cancer. It's treatable," she starts. I am relieved, but why does she say that so sadly? "But it has spread everywhere. My lymph nodes, my kidneys, my lungs. Neveah, I'm going to die."

The voice starts in my head, small and sure. No. No. No. Then it gets louder, and louder, until it's pounding in my head, like a headache, only worse. NO. NO. PLEASE NO!!

"No!" I scream. "You liar! Mothers don't die! Mothers don't die!" Mom reaches out and grabs my arm and pulls me close. Tears are streaming down my face. Then, Mom starts singing a lullaby that her mother sang to her when she was little.

*My darling, you are mine,
but when hardships come to greet,
Baby, soft and sweet,
Pray, yes pray,
Ask Him, and you shall receive.*

"Nevaeh," she says, handing me a small piece of crumpled paper. "Take this. I want you to know this person when I'm gone."

"No! You won't die. Stop talking like that!" I cry. Mom sighs.

"Nevaeh, you are only setting yourself for more sadness when I..." She doesn't finish.

"What's the IV for?" I ask.

"The treatment caused a bad fever and some pains," she answers.

"Is that normal?" I ask. She sighs and lays her head on the pillow.

"I don't know, Nevaeh." She looks tired, with bags under her eyes. And that yellowish tint in her skin. I stand there for a moment, neither of us speaking to each other. We were happy together. Me and my mom were silly people. And me and Robert... well, we got along.

It was hard for me because my dad left right after I was born. He didn't even choose to see me. Whenever I try and talk about it with my mom, her lips get in a thin line and she says, drily, "That was his choice, and I hope he's happy with it because he sure caused us a whole lotta pain."

I know Robert loves me, at least tries to love me, but I just can't trust him. He and my mom married when I was six. My thoughts were interrupted by a sharp, brisk knock on the door. The doctor came in, and in a cold

English accent, said "I don't mean to ... interrupt here, but we need to run more tests. So, shoo." He waves his hand at me, as if I was fly that he was swatting out of his newly cleaned house.

"I love you, sweet!" Mom called from her hospital bed. I didn't respond. I walked numbly out, and as Robert stood up, he could see I was disturbed, so he didn't say a word as we walked to the car. As I walked out, the cold January air hit me hard, and then I saw something even more dismal. It was snowing. Come on. Don't cry. Don't cry. You're twelve now. A sixth grader! Come on.

"Oh, please dear Lord. Please don't. You know. In your name I pray, Amen," I mutter under my breath.

"Wanna pray?" Robert's voice comes a few paces away from me.

"I just did," I mumble. I hear him mutter his own prayer anyway. When we got into the car, he said "Try not to be so hard on your mom, okay?"

"What?! She was making this horrible joke about dying!" I cried. Robert pulled over. He whirled around to face me.

"Nevaeh! She is gonna die!" There are tears in his eyes.

"How long will she live?" I ask.

"I dunno. Maybe a month. At the most." I sink back into my seat.

"She can't," I whisper. Robert doesn't hear.

When we get home, Robert says "I am going to go back to the hospital. Your mom is gonna want me with her there."

"Okay," I say, numbly. I walk into the house. It seems so empty without Mom. I look around. Since Mom had left for the hospital three days ago, the house had become a disaster. Piles of dirty and clean laundry everywhere, a pile of dirty dishes in the sink, my room is a mess, my shoes are on the floor, and Robert's ties are practically everywhere.

I tackle the laundry. Done. I do the dishes. Done. I embrace my room. Done. I pick up my shoes and clean up the muddy spot they left on the floor. Done. I pick up all Robert's ties. Done. Then I make brownies. Mom always makes brownies when I'm feeling sad. I eat one, but don't taste a bit of its sweetness. I heat up the leftover pot roast, and don't taste that either. Suddenly I hear her. My mother. 'Oh, you are so responsible, Nevaeh. So responsible, my sweet.' I jump up, throw my dishes in the dishwasher and race upstairs.

"Mom? Mom?!" I yell at the top of my lungs. My dark chocolate brown hair, streaked with goldenrod blonde hair, gets in my face. Suddenly, I see her in her work office. "Mom! Oh Mom!!" When I get into her office, she isn't there. It was a mirage. For what seemed like the millionth time that day, I wanted to cry.

I stomped to the bathroom, took a shower, and put on my pajamas. I looked at my clock. It was 8:30. Whatever, I'd go to bed early. Then, I remembered the paper Mom had given me. I grabbed it and read it. It said, "Gilbert Sonsaz" and then a phone number. Wait... That was my father's name! My mother wanted me to know my father? I raced to the phone and dialed the number, breathlessly.

"Hello?" came a voice.

"Hello? Is this Gilbert Sonsaz?" Silence. Then a muffled woman's voice was what I heard next.

"Hon? The kids won't settle down. Can you come after you're done?"

"Sure," my father answered. All my shyness, tenderness, and wish to forgive him disappeared in an instant, and was replaced with a burning anger that I had felt for years.

"I'm sorry, yes, this is Gilbert Sonsaz. Um, do you want something, because as you can see, I am a very busy man." I heard him chuckle.

"Oh, I don't want anything much. Just an explanation," I said, my voice as cold as ice. When he spoke, I could tell he was rather taken aback by my tone of voice.

"An... explanation?" he said.

"Yes. An explanation of why you left me when I was a baby."

"Nevaeh??" He was in disbelief.

"Yes. It is me. And I want an explanation of why? You have children of your own, I see, but you couldn't even stay behind and raise your own daughter."

"Oh, Nevaeh, it... It was a midlife crisis. I didn't want children, but your mother did. Once we found out

she was pregnant, we started arguing a lot. And then she had you, and I just left. Then I met Cheryl, my current wife, and we married and... I decided that I kinda did want kids. I have Nina, who's four, Gregg, who's two, and Sapphire, who's eighteen days old. I know my excuse is a poor one, Nevaeh, but I want you to know that me and Cheryl pray for you and your mother every day." I didn't answer. "How can I make things right between us?" he asked.

"Come to Grayson Hospital at 3:15 tomorrow. Room 302," I said.

"What?! You're in the hospital? Wait, Nevaeh! I didn't-" I hung up. I tried to stay up and wait for Robert to get home, but I finally laid down. I didn't hear Robert come in and sit on my bed. And then for the first time, I hugged him. And then we cried together.

The next day, I walked up to my best friend, Ximena.

"Hey!" she said. "My Abuela baked some fresh tortillas! I will give some to you at almuerzo! That's Spanish for lunch." I managed a smile.

"I know," I said.

"Is something wrong?" She frowned.

"Mom," I whispered.

"No! Your Mama?! Oh, Nev." She hugged me. I sometimes wonder if Ximena loves my mom more than I do.

"She has melanoma. It's this skin cancer. She's gonna die." Ximena's eyes filled with tears.

Then she smiled a little bit. "Don't worry. Extra tortillas at almuerzo."

The rest of the day was pretty boring. U.S. presidents, algebra, the regular. After school, Robert picked me up. I told him I wanted to go to the hospital with him. When I got there, I waited for my dad. Robert went into Mom's room. At 3:16, Dad came. I rushed toward him and embraced him. Then I said hello to his wife.

"Nevaeh, I am so sorry that your father left you. I pray for you all the time," she said. We hugged. I met my half-sisters and brother. They were sweet!

"Okay," I said. "Mom has melanoma. It is treatable, but it spread to her other internal organs. She doesn't have much longer."

"Oh, honey," Cheryl said. We all walked to Mom's door. When we entered, Cheryl and the kids went and stood near Robert. I went and hugged Mom, and she saw Dad.

"Gilbert," she said, smiling at him. "I forgive you."

"Me, too," I said.

"Thank you," he said. Then we all hugged.

"I love you guys," I said.

Wow!

By Scarlett Chance, Grade 4

NRHEG Elementary, Ellendale

Hi! I'm September. I know it's a weird name but my parents like it so I'm stuck with it. I'm really scared to start Wisconsin Middle School. I also think no one will be friends with me, because I have no right ear! It already feels like I will not fit in. School starts tomorrow. We moved here from Oregon. Oops, I forgot to tell you my middle and last name. Well my middle name is May, and my last name is Hutchinson. September May Hutchinson. Ok, back to the task on hand. Help me!

I have no idea what I'm going to do. Maybe I could hide in the dryer or put a fake ear on. OMG, I don't know what to do! Ok I'm on the school bus, and everything is normal, but the weird thing is that everyone has something wrong with them. Maybe this day will be a good day.

When the bus pulled up to a house, a girl got on the bus and sat by me! She said, "So, what's wrong with you."

"I don't have a right ear," I whispered.

"Ha, that's better than having no left arm."

We talked about what classes we had together and why we were there. I think that we were becoming friends.

When we got to school we walked to home room together. The teacher talked about classroom responsibilities. I got "librarian." Librarian is where you clean up the bookshelves. The girl, oh by the way, her name is Margret, got "table cleaner." Both of us got a job, because we are dependable.

Well, now it's time for lunch. Margret and I sat by this girl named Sarah. I kept asking her questions, but she would not answer me. Then we found out that she was deaf. Did you know that Margret can speak sign language? Boy that's helpful!

The next class was gym. We played badminton. Margret, Sarah and I were on a team. We were against three boys named Logan, Martin and Chase. We dominated them. Logan is blind, but still a good badminton player. Martin has no legs, and Chase is in a wheelchair. We still treated them fair, because we knew that how they looked does not interfere with how they play ball.

Next, we walked to my favorite class – history! We learned about the World Wars in history. My favorite is World War II. I like learning about Ann Frank because she wasn't being treated right during that time. Like, who has to hide behind a cupboard just to live?

I only have one more class, math. I don't like math at all. We learned about the periodic table. Oh wait, that's science. Ok I admit it, I don't remember what we did for math. I was daydreaming about the end of the school day.

School ended. All my new friends and I walked to the bus. On the way home we talked about how we maybe are not so weird after all. We did all the things that other kids do. Just because our bodies work different doesn't mean that we are weird. I finally figured out that I am normal. Different doesn't make you weird.

Lesson Across the Street

By Autumn Gaul and Evie Johnson, Grade 4

Kennedy Elementary, Mankato

Chapter one: My Responsibility!

July 19, 2020

Hi! I am Ellie Joy. I am 16 and I love chocolate. It is the BEST! Anyw- BANG BANG WOOF! Oh, and that is my dog Louie. He makes a lot of messes and loves Oreos more than anything. My mom and dad work for the government, so they work more than a lot of people. So that apparently means that I have a lot of responsibilities like: take care of Louie, make breakfast, lunch and dinner. Oh, I also babysit. I love it! I am saving up for a trip to France! It is really cool there! Rumble rumble beep beep! I live across the street from old crazy Miss Mckever and her daughter Lavender. They are bad luck. No one wants to go by them.

The next day Louie and I went on a walk. A nice breeze went by and then I saw Lavender on the other side of my house. Next thing I knew, there were two lightning strikes and Lavender vanished. Louie got spooked, he pulled on the leash and we were off. WOOSH!

I got leaves in my face. Ouch! Of course a stick poked me right in the leg. Finally, we were home. The phone was ringing. It reminded me of the Wonder Pets theme song. I picked up the phone. It was Miss Mckever. Miss Mckever asked in a grumpy tone, "Will you watch my daughter Lavender? At the end you will get a special award." I was not really sure if I wanted to babysit Lavender.

I said to Miss Mckever, "I am... I"

"Oh come on, hurry up. Are you going to do it or not?" said Miss Mckever. Apparently my mouth said yes. I asked for a time and date. Miss Mckever said, "Tomorrow at 8 p.m. on the dot." I tried to go to bed but I kept on thinking about tomorrow.

I woke up at 7:50 a.m. and made my bed. Also, I ate a banana for breakfast. It was so good! I got myself ready. Then I ran across the street but looked both ways first. My heart was pounding like crazy. I thought it was going to pop out.

Knock, knock! Creak! A small girl opened the door. It was Lavender. I shivered and got goosebumps. Lavender let me in. She squeaked, "Hello." I said Hello back because it seemed polite. The door closed and I felt a small breeze. I looked around and I saw pink and purple polka-dot wallpaper. Then, I was totally shocked because Lavender handed me a protein bar.

"It is homemade," she said. I closed my eyes and tried it. OMG! It is so GOOD! I was amazed.

"Thank you," I said.

Miss Mckever came out of her room and said, "I will be back soon. I am going to work." Then she turned around and was out of the door in a flash. I didn't even see her face.

Chapter Two: What Do You Want to Do?

"What do you want to do?" I ask as we sit down.

"Color.... Please?" said Lavender

"Um sure," I say in a weird voice. Lavender brought me into a colorful room. Then we started to draw.

"What are you drawing?" Lavender asked.

"A dog," I said.

"I like cats more than dogs, but don't worry I still like dogs," whispered Lavender.

"So what are you drawing Lavender?"

"I am drawing a butterfly." It was really pretty with blue wings. Also, it had purple and pink stripes. After, she hung hers up and yelled happily, "I am done!"

"Who's dog is that?" asked Lavender.

"My dog," I say.

"Can you bring your dog over?" Lavender asked.

I say in a shaky voice "sure Lavender." Then I give her a thumbs up. Lavender smiles and does a happy dance. Then Lavender and I run across the street to my house and grab Louie. Louie was so happy to see me, but then Louie saw Lavender and did some kind of weird noise. I put Louie on a leash and Lavender, Louie and I walked back to Lavender and Miss Mckevers house.

I let Louie off the leash and then Lavender went up to Louie and started petting him. Louie loved it. "So cute!" Lavender says. I think Lavender took off some of Louie's hair when she was petting him. But, don't worry he is fine. He did need a haircut, but not anymore.

Lavender and I had so much fun! Time went by fast and it was already 11:30. Lavender and I decided that we wanted to go outside first. All of us headed outside. Lavender went to the garage and grabbed a big blue ball. She started tossing it in the air. I check the temperature on my phone just in case. 75 degrees out. There was a nice breeze and the sun was shining down on me. There was a humongous breeze that went by and the ball started to blow away. Louie chased after it. He came back with it in his teeth, but something was quite different about it. Oh, I know, it was deflated. I grabbed it from Louie.

"Lavender, time to go inside." I say. We walked inside and I said, "Are you hungry?"

Chapter Three: Lunch Time!

Flick! The lights turn on and I see a clean big kitchen. Lavender is right behind me and says, "What do you want to make?"

"What do you mean?" I say. Then I remember and say, "Oh yeah! It is lunch time. I can't believe that I said are you hungry and now I totally forgot." All of the sudden Lavender and I start laughing. The laughing went

on for a while but when we stopped.

"I don't know what you want to make?" I asked. We both smiled at each other and yelled, "Pizza!"

"Do you want to make homemade pizza or frozen pizza?" Lavender asks.

"Well homemade is fun but takes longer and frozen pizza is short but is not as fun," I say. "You choose."

"I want to do homemade," Lavender says.

"Sounds good," I say. "Do you have any dough?"

"Yes! I have leftovers from the last time me and my mom ate it," Lavenders squeeks.

Grumble, grumble. My stomach started to growl. I tell Lavender, "Let's make some pizza!"

Lavender grabs the dough from the fridge and sets it down on the counter. Lavender made her pizza into a heart shape. I make my pizza into a paw print. Well I think it is a paw print.

"We need tomato sauce, Lavender," I say. "Do you have any tomato sauce?"

"No," says Lavender. "But we have a garden. Come on Ellie, follow me!" She exclaimed.

Lavender and I head down the stairs outside and right over to the garden. We each grab two tomatoes and go back to the kitchen. Lavender and I put the tomatoes down and grab the knife. We cut the tomatoes up and add seasonings. Then we took a spoon and spread it across the pizza. Lavender walked over to the fridge and grabbed cheese. Then she brought it over and spread it all over her pizza.

"Here you go," she said as she handed me the cheese. I put a lot of cheese on mine. Once we were done, Lavender said "Do you want pepperoni or sausage?"

"Pepperoni please." She grabs the pepperoni and we both put a little on our pizza. After we take the pizza and put it in the oven for 13 minutes max.

We played checkers while we were waiting for it to cook. I lost every time. BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!!!!

"Pizza!" we both shouted. We both walked over to the oven and opened it.

"Yum that smells amazing," I say. Gurgle! I giggle because that was a funny gurgle and it came from Lavender.

"Can we eat now? I am starving," says Lavender.

"Of course," I say. I take the pizzas out and set them on the table. Lavender washed her hands and sat down. I washed my hands after her and sat across from where she was sitting. The pizza was sitting right in front of us. We looked at it, then looked at each other and said, "Let's eat!"

We both started munching it down. Then there was only one pizza left. Both of us grabbed it. Then there was a big tug of war fight with the pizza. "MINE MINE MINE MINE" We were fighting over it and all of the sudden Lavender grabbed it from me. But it slipped out of her hands and guess what happened? If you said, 'Louie grabbed it,' you are correct! Louie had the pizza and ran right into the door but somehow the door opened and woosh, he was off.

"Give it back you little beast!" I shouted.

Chapter Four: The Big Chase!

"I'm so tired I could die!" says Lavender

"Your mom is going to be home in 13 minutes come on, we can do this," I say in my proud confident voice. We started running again but then an idea popped right in my head. "Stop!" I shout. "I have an idea. A big one so we can get Louie back! Hallelujah for Ellie Joy!" I shout.

Lavender taps on my shoulder and says, "You are being dramatic."

"Oh whatever, we need Oreos."

"We cannot feed him the Oreos."

"We just have to hold them and yell Oreos." Lavender and I run with all our might to go grab Oreos to lure Louie in. Finally we were at her house and had oreos.

"OREOS OREOS OREOS!" We kept saying it. Then I heard barking and there Louie was with a big smile on his face. Also, there was cheese too.

"Louie, I thought I lost you." I gave the little fur ball a hug and whispered into his ear, "I love you!" I picked up Louie and we went inside. After we got inside Lavender and I decided to make dinner for Miss

Mckeever. Rumble, rumble, beep, beep. I hear the garage door open.

Chapter Five: The Reward/Secret!

Miss Mckeever walked in and said, "Time for your reward!"

I think in my head, 'Oh my gosh I am so excited.'

Miss Mckeever walked closer towards me and said, "a lesson is your reward."

"Huh?" I say.

Miss Mckeever continues, "You learned to not judge a book by it's cover. You thought that we were weird and evil but we are caring and nice."

I did think that, and I am sorry for assuming. I say, "Thanks and goodbye." While I was going back to my house, I realized I forgot Louie. I went back to the Mckevers house and Louie came out barking. We walked home together and I just felt really embarrassed.

One Month Later

"Dad, Mom you're home. I have so much to tell you!" I say. "Let's start where I babysit at the creepy, crazy lady's house and meet her nice daughter Lavender. So, first off me and Lav-" I get cut off from my dad and then he starts talking.

"Ellie I have something to tell you. Mckeever is my sister." Louie does a big huffing noise.

"What?!"

To be continued...

The Party

By Brennan Glawe, Grade 7

Cathedral High School, New Ulm

The gentle wind blew in Martha's face as she walked to school. The wind was calm and relaxing. Her walking slowed just to enjoy the breeze. She turned a corner and kept walking, thinking about what she was going to do that day and what her student council meeting would bring. She closed her eyes, soaking in every delicious moment of that gorgeous morning. Unbeknownst to her, Claudia was biking in her direction.

Claudia loved to beat up on others and especially enjoyed it when she could ruin someone's day. This was tolerated by her parents due to Claudia's Grandpa's unexpected death, and Claudia becoming a whole new person afterward.

So, when Claudia saw Martha off in the distance, she knew that it was the perfect opportunity to ruin Martha's day, and Claudia knew just how to do it.

Claudia knew that Martha was part of the student council team and was running out of time to get to the meeting. Claudia also knew that Martha was very smart and wouldn't be delayed by simple tricks. Something else, another trick would be needed. Possibly something she liked...

She cycled about a half block away from Martha and got off her bike. She then threw the bike to the side of the sidewalk and pulled out a couple of books from her backpack. She began walking down the sidewalk, gazing, and making hand gestures at the book as though she didn't understand.

When they crossed paths, Claudia stood in front of Martha who still had her eyes closed. She then bumped Martha with the book in her hands. Martha opened her eyes, shocked that she had been interrupted on this beautiful day.

"Hey," Claudia said. "Can you help me with my math?" Martha hesitated, she might be late for the meeting, but helping other people was just, and right.

"Yeah, I can help you," Martha said. "So, how can you take $2x+3=4x$?" Martha began explaining the problem. Claudia understood the problem, and had no problem solving it but decided to play stupid to waste more time.

"I don't get it," Claudia said. Martha sighed, and ran through all the basics that the teacher had just told them the previous day, little did she know she was running out of time. Fifteen minutes had passed, and Claudia decided to let up.

"Oh, I get it now," Claudia said, after it had been explained six times. Claudia slammed the book closed. "Well, I'm going to go to school now." Claudia began running down the sidewalk to retrieve her bike but then realized, turned around and said, "Thank you!"

"You're welcome!" Martha yelled back at her. Martha sighed, then looked down at her watch, 7:50 a.m.! She was already 20 minutes late, to a 30-minute meeting. She ran as fast as she could down the sidewalk. What would she do? How much trouble was she in? Could she make up an excuse? These thoughts swam through her mind. No, it was her fault that she was late, and no one else's.

She ran down the street as fast as she could, the breeze blowing by her ears. She couldn't be late, she thought. Martha remembered how strict her school was with being late. She gave off a light groan and kept running.

It was 7:58 a.m. now and Martha had finally made it to school. She immediately took a sharp right and ran up the stairs, skipping every other step. She made it to the first landing and whipped around the corner, only to run into more people, but she kept climbing the stairs.

"Wait!" the person yelled at her.

"Sorry! I'm late for a meeting," she yelled back at the person, who she didn't recognize because she was running so fast. She heard something being yelled back, but she was already too far away to hear.

She finally climbed the last step and ran down the hallway as fast as she could, dodging the loose backpacks and musical instrument cases in the hallway. When she got to the room, she came to a skidding halt. She threw herself into the room and...no one, not one breathing thing.

Martha took a moment to gasp for more air. She looked around, her eyes wandering aimlessly around the room until her eyes fell to her watch 8 a.m. She then took a moment to think. Why were there backpacks in the hallway? Why was there barely anyone around? Martha knew, in the back of her head, she knew. The school spelling bee was that day, and she was participating in it.

She ran out of the room and thundered down the hall, everything around her becoming a blur. She came to the top of the stairs and jumped as powerfully as she could. She was too caught up in the moment and completely forgot to control her jump. She started soaring down, down and down, until crack...

An unbearable, devastating pain shot through her body. She went limp and fell down. However, she still had the momentum from before and started rolling down the stairs, every time landing on a new step hurt worse and worse until she reached the bottom. Everything was fuzzy like she had lost circulation in her whole body, except her leg, which hurt so bad that Martha immediately thought that she was dead, and then nothing. She passed out.

Beep, beep, beep, a heart monitor beeped nearby, it was so tiring. Martha had heard the same sound for the last 10 minutes. She thought she knew where she was but she didn't want to open her eyes to confirm it.

She realized that she had to eventually open her eyes. Peering through slits, she could see she was in a white room. There was a curtain to her left and white blank walls everywhere else. She was laying on a hospital cot. Her leg, it didn't even look like a leg. She was disgusted by it, and it hurt, not as much as before, but it still hurt really bad. She didn't even want to think about it and drifted off back into sleep. When she woke up next, she could see someone to the right of her.

"He-hello?" she asked. A sturdy young man turned from the heart monitor screen and smiled at her.

"You're going to be alright," he said calmly. "You suffered three fractures in your leg. But with a lot of healing, you will be able to walk again." Martha, satisfied with this, drifted off back into sleep.

Claudia felt horrible. She had only wanted Martha to be late to a student council meeting, not completely miss a vital meeting, miss the spelling bee, and break her leg. Claudia didn't even like pain to that level. She

closed her locker, her mind flashing back to the fainted girl on the staircase. She had to make it up to her somehow. She had to make it right.

The next few weeks were torture for Martha, but she endured them. When she was finally released from the hospital, she was given crutches. They were uncomfortable and made her feel awkward. She was also given instructions to take it easy, no parties, no sports a doctor had said.

The first day back to school was also torturing. First, she was kicked off the student council team, then she was given the homework that she missed over the last few weeks, but then a sudden change happened. Martha closed her locker, and stabilized herself back on her crutches.

"Hey, do you want to go to the party tomorrow night?" Claudia asked. Martha blinked, taken aback by how quickly Claudia had shown up in her face.

"Uh," she hesitated. "No, that's ok." This didn't go over well with Claudia who insisted. Claudia stuck out a piece of paper at Martha.

"Come," she said

"Well," Martha hesitated again. "Okay," and then she thrust her hand out to receive the piece of paper.

"Okay, see you there!" Claudia said, and ran off.

"Okay," Martha mumbled and waved. "Bye." Martha looked down at the piece of paper and saw a date, time and address. She smiled, this could be the start to a new friendship with Claudia.

On Martha's way home, she realized she had a mountain of homework that night and wouldn't be able to get it all completed because they were going to her little brother's soccer game. When she got home, she threw her backpack on the bed and laid down. She could either make the irrational choice of going to the party tomorrow, make the mean choice of not going to her brother's soccer tournament, or make the right and responsible choice of going to her brother's game and doing homework the next night.

She knew what the right and responsible choice was. She called Claudia telling her that she wouldn't be able to make it to the party. Claudia yelled at her, swearing and telling her that she was a coward and a wimp. Martha hung up the phone, not distraught but happy.

She moved on from that day forth. Her leg healed. She kept up with her studies and went to Harvard University. She got a stable job, a healthy family and she never let someone manipulate her ever again.

The Thieves' Hold

By Ethan Gordon, Grade 4

Lakeview Elementary School, Albert Lea

*To fire the world will fall
Up from the ashes a hero will rise
The Dragon's bane stands from within*

Prologue

The Mistress was taking her niece back to the courtyard from the woods when the poor five-year-old stumbled upon a dragon's nest while straying from her aunt.

"Oh no, it can't be. I thought they were gone!" The Mistress whispered urgently. The niece went and touched the blood red egg that meant that there was going to be a king blood dragon. Suddenly there was a flapping noise.

The Mistress ran to grab her niece Poppy, but it was too late. The dragon snagged Poppy by the shirt and flew away. The Mistress ran screaming for her guards at Oakwoods Castle. She would have to tell Poppy's parent's the bad news. As for Poppy, well she was never seen again.

Once in a magical place of dangers and wealth called Tritha (Tree-tha) I lived as a young boy. I'm named Rex. My father thought of it. It means "King" in Latin. So, back to the story. Suddenly while I was doing my chores, like feeding the animals and getting water from the nearby well, the Queen burst out the woods like a headless chicken screaming about something to do with a dragon. I started to ask people what the Queen meant. But then, just as I was going to get an answer, I felt my neck go cold, like a spider was crawling around on it. When I turned around I saw it, the massive white dragon.

"Hello humans, I will spare your town, but only if you lay down your weapons and leave this forest," the dragon boomed.

"Never!" a brave group of guards yelled. They charged with as much fury as they could muster. But nevertheless, they were scorched by the wicked flames from the dragon, a malevolent look in its eye.

"Is that all you can muster? I've burned down far bigger castles than this," the dragon said, shaking the earth.

"We will never let the likes of you destroy our town!" I blurted out quickly covering my mouth before I could say any more. The dragon looked amused at the fact that something so small in comparison to it could be so stubborn and basically refuse to live.

"I was once called Avalanche, but now I am called The White Death." The dragon continued, "I was banned from the dragon's cove. Would you like to know why? Because I was apparently too violent and hunting without reason." The dragon yelled at first, but then did the kind of voice where you whine about something that someone said.

Suddenly I heard another noise behind me. Then I felt a rush of adrenaline and without really thinking, I turned around and caught something from the air. It was a bow. And I'm definitely not a kid that could do archery or the kind that could just catch something out of the air and start using it. But here I was, standing right there with a bow in my hand, facing a giant glowering beast. That dragon was also specifically glowering at me. Most likely because of two reasons. Number one, I blurted out something at it, and number two, I was holding a bow at my side.

When the dragon came face to face with me I nearly screamed. If you have ever had to experience something like this, I feel pretty bad for you. First there was the horrible breath. Not to mention those malevolent green eyes. Oh, and I forgot to mention the scales. No wonder he was called the white death. You could smell the destruction that followed it. The scales were torn, the horns chipped.

"Hello, I see that you have a weapon in your possession," the dragon smirked.

"Um, I... I was just standing here and suddenly it was in my hand," I said, shaking.

"Oh, so it just magically flew into your hands?"

"No! It was thrown by somebody!" I yelled, instantly regretting saying it.

The dragon started to fly over the street. I knew I couldn't let him hurt the person who was there. I knew I would regret it but nonetheless I drew back the arrow and let it fly. Luckily my arrow was black steel, the only arrow type that could pierce a dragon's scales. Suddenly the dragon lurched forward and dropped to the ground, but not before burning the whole town to the ground.

Right before the dragon died it let out one last breath that was most likely the strongest I've ever seen. Though that was just a feeling, I've never seen something like that before. Suddenly everyone erupted in cheer and stampeded towards me. They lifted me into the air and cheered my name.

"Go and rebuild! We shouldn't just mourn! The king and I need to have a castle and you need to have shacks!" The Queen yelled, and everybody obeyed.

"No! We need to go to the other castles and tell them what happened. Then we can rebuild, except we all put effort into it. Not just the commoners!" I yelled in defiance.

"Well, well, well, I guess that we—" The King was cut off by the sudden disappearance of his crown. There was a shadowy figure across the ruins, it appeared to be running. The King paced back and forth. "Oh no, if I don't have my crown no one will obey me!" he said, clearly troubled.

Then one of the many devastated by the destruction of their homes spoke up and said confidently, "why can't Rex go and get the crown?"

Everyone cheered, clearly very confident in me. I quickly ducked away behind a pillar. When I turned

around I was shocked to see that the dragon's homeless corpse lay silent and still under a crushed log. I slowly backed away from the dragon. Just as I turned I heard a noise. The kind of noise that fills anyone's heart with fear and dread. Even the strongest feared that noise. The noise of a dragon's flame pouring out of its mouth, igniting everything it touched.

"Everybody run! The Dragon is waking up!" I screamed, sprinting across the now barren courtyard.

"Don't believe him, keep searching for my crown!" the king ordered stubbornly.

"My King, I have found it!" said the King's advisor, probably the most loyal out of everyone.

"No! You must believe me, I saw the eyes open, the neck started to get red with flames!" I yelled.

"Nonsense, what did you find advisor Alfred?" the King asked.

"I found this trap door and latch here on the ground," Alfred said, bowing with a smirk. "It was covered with dirt."

"What?" I yelled, "No! forget about your crown and we might just live."

"No, guards, take me down there to find my crown," the king ordered. As the king walked down the planks of the broken cart to open the latch he dropped a peculiar thing. There in front of me was a strange pendant with the mark of two lines clashing into each other, and a line stabbing from behind. The mark of a traitor. The King quickly picked it up and glared at me. When I looked up I saw daggers staring at me where his eyes should be. As Alfred and the guards walked down into the hold one of them glanced back, it was my friend Harry. I hoped that no harm would befall him.

While the King descended down the steps I tried to convince people to run. Just as I got the last person to come with me I heard a noise and turned. It was like an earthquake, then there was a roar and flapping. The dragon was coming.

As the dragon flew over the broken buildings and the ashes of wood, it let out a bellowing roar. It was like the whole world was shaking and falling into the void. Then it landed.

"Where is the King!" the dragon said, shaking the ground.

"What do you mean? The king fled!" I said, lying the best I could. No matter how much I dislike the King, I will never become a slave to a dragon. I turned and yelled for everybody to run to the nearest castle. No one moved. They were all petrified by fear.

"Run!" I yelled at the top of my voice.

"Oh, you think that they will run don't you. Well If they ran, I will tell you that they will surely get turned into a pile of ash. So, if I was you, I wouldn't run," it said, clearly amused. As the dragon kept talking I slowly shuffled away. It was like I was a special battalion trying to sneak into enemy lines. Well, except for the fact that I was alone, and that I was sneaking away from a giant fire breathing beast, who also had giant fangs.

"Wait!" yelled a little kid in the dense crowd of people.

"Not now," I whispered, hoping it hadn't heard me. I moved a little farther and it happened again! "Shhhh!" I kept telling him.

Now that the dragon had started talking about how he was going to make us slaves and was repeating that whole memo about not running, I was starting to think that the dragon was not that smart.

Just as I had made it to the forest the King came up and shouted that he had found his crown. Then the King started to realize what he had just walked into. I ran back into the clearing and put my hands up.

"It is their right to be free and have a home! And it is your responsibility to make sure that happens!" I yelled pointing at the King.

"But it is also their responsibility to work!" the king said, beginning to get angry.

"True, but then we circle back to you!" I yelled waving a finger at him.

"Um, so are two done bickering? Okay, so back to me enslaving the world," the dragon or The White Death said, snaking his head around us.

As the dragon made a wide circle around us I could feel its breath, the heavy force of a dragon's breathing was terrifying. It also smelled worse than barreled fish. Once we were completely encircled, it said with a heavy and intimidating voice, "Would you dare oppose me?" After the dragon boomed out the words it raised its head and rushed forward, its mouth open. Without thinking I pulled the bow out of its tube, nocked an arrow and lined up the shot with the inside of the dragon's throat. It felt like time froze, and I let the arrow fly.

A Long Way from the Farm

By Olivia Graddy, Grade 3

Eagle View Elementary, New Prague

My name is Sunlight. Well, obviously I'm yellow, but a light yellow, with white stripes. I have bright yellow eyes. I'm a barn cat. For some reason the barn that I live in is orange. Like, a bright orange. Nova and Miles Canlight adopted me a few years ago. Their daughter's name is Erza Canlight. Their son's name is Owen Canlight. Erza is seven. Owen is three. Erza was four when they adopted me.

"Cat, get over here!" Erza snaps. I hiss. My name is not Cat it's Sunlight!

"Stop calling me that!" I say.

"Cat! Come over here!" Erza calls.

It's hard because cats talk a different language than humans but cats can still understand them. I slowly walk over to Erza. I stand with my butt facing her. Then she quickly digs her nails in to my skin! "Aaaaaooow!" It felt like a knife! More like five knives! And what did I do then? I bit her hand. Not that hard though.

"Bad cat!" she says holding her hand. Then she yanks my tail! That was it! I jump onto Betsy the cow.

"Mooove," she said slowly. So I do. I jump on Erza's head. She screeches so loud that I can barely hear her. She runs in circles until I fall off her head. Then she runs over to Miles.

"Daddy!" she screeches. "Cat jumped on my head for no reason!"

Oh no! I race into the cornfield and hide in the middle. I walk around and then I see Owen, just sitting there, trying to peel the husk off the corn with his teeth. Once he mostly peels it all off, he starts to try and eat it. He shreds the corn with his teeth and eats it off the ground, dirt and all. Then he looks over at me.

"Hiya Swunwite!" he says crawling over to me. "The cown taste baaaaaad!" he says. "Bluck!" he says loudly.

Then I hear, "Owen! Owen where are you?" It's Nova calling him. He scampers out of the cornfield. "C'mon, we're leaving." she yells. I walk out of the corn and peek out of it. I see him hop into the red dusty pickup truck. Then they drive away.

When they come back they're all holding a little blue blanket with a clump of something inside. They unwrap it and inside is a golden retriever puppy. Like I wasn't enough!

"Let's call him Cway!" Owen says with excitement. And it's settled. The dog's name is Clay. They carefully put him on the ground.

"Go explore!" Erza screams. Clay looks at me with his big blueberry colored eyes. Then he starts to wag his tail fast.

"That's Sunlight, the mean cat," Erza tells him.

"Raf raf!" he says but I can't understand what he's saying.

"She jumped on my head for no reason!" she hollers.

"Yeah right!" I shout back.

Then Nova brings a plastic bag out of the truck and dumps it on the ground. Doggy toys fall everywhere! Four bones, a stuffed fish, a ball that's a squeaky toy that looks like a ladybug and a black hat. Owen takes the black hat and puts it on Clay's head. Then he puts the strap under his chin.

"Mister Cway!" he announces.

"Ha ha ha ha," Nova fake laughs.

Then Clay jumps on me. I know that he wants to play. I don't wanna be that mean cat so I try to play. We both start to run in a circle. Round and round we go!

"Waf waf raf!" he says breathing heavily as we run. The hat falls off Clay's head. It is kinda fun. As I look behind my back I see corn move. It isn't the wind. There is something in there. I run over there but Clay follows me.

"Go away," I say but he doesn't listen. So I let him follow me. If there is something scary in the corn I would run and he would follow me. I slowly walk into the corn, ready to pounce. It's right in front of me. I pounce on to it. "Hsssss!" I hear. I look down and see dark gray cat. It has emerald green eyes. I jump off of it.

"Who are you?" I ask while I'm circling around him.

"Well I would like to know who you are first!" he says in an annoyed voice.

"This is my farm," I say proudly.

"I'm Moonlight," he says swiftly. My heart skips a beat.

"Moonlight," I say looking into his green eyes.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"It's not important," I say. "Just call me Anonymous."

"Fine. I saw a mouse scamper in here," he says kinda mad. "Who's that?" he asks pawing in the direction of Clay who was about a foot away.

I pause and then say, "He is Anonymous Junior."

"Hey Junior," he says to Clay.

"He-he doesn't talk," I tell him.

"Can't, or won't?" he asks. I just ignore him even though I know that he can't. "He is so little though," his voice trails off. I walk slowly towards him and he slowly walks back.

"What?" he asks but I keep walking. We both walk out of the cornfield. Clay is right behind me. Then Moonlight jumps in front of me and pushes me down the hill with his front paws. I roll down the hill as fast as a roadrunner. Once I'm at the bottom of the hill I roll into a river. The rapids push me away from the barn quicker than you can say meow-ity meow. The water starts to slow down and I'm soaked. Ew!

I jump out of the water and start to walk around. I look back and see Clay swimming in the river. He jumps out and shakes water out of his fur. Then he paces toward me. Oh no! He just left the farm! Oh well.

I see a little cottage about half the size of the barn. I see a girl looking out the window with straight brown hair and a silky pink dress. She's on the second floor. Then she looks over at me. I see her race away from the window. The next thing you know, the door is wide open and she's racing toward us.

"Hey puppy and kitty," she says sweetly. "Where are you from?" I think I'll give up answering. "Who are you guys?" she asks. "I'm AnnaLea Maria."

I try to say 'This is Clay' but I say, "Meowis yeow Cweow."

"Silly kitty!" she says.

I try again. "Meowm Weowmeowt." I was trying to say I'm Sunlight.

She picks both of us up and brings us inside. She sets us both on a little wooden blue table. She looks about Erza's age. She looks at Clay then at me. She looks at Clay again. "I'll call you Puppies." She looks over at me. "I'll call you Banana." she says.

Then a boy who looks about ten walks through the door. He has a white shirt on with blue jeans. He has red and white plaid suspenders on. He has dirty blonde hair that looks very clean. AnnaLea looks at him with her big brown eyes as he stares at us. She has about one million freckles.

"This is Puppies and this is Banana," she says proudly. "That's Clark," AnnaLea whispers.

Clark runs upstairs in a flash. AnnaLea grabs a stack of paper and a pen and starts to write: I found a lost dog and a lost cat. If you have a lost cat and (or) a lost dog please come find me. Just follow the river west. Have a good day! From your friend, AnnaLea Maria.

She wrote about 60 copies of that exact same thing. Then she ran outside. I jump off the table and follow her. Clay does too. She makes about half into paper airplanes and the other half into sailboats. She sends the sailboats in the river and throws the airplanes in the sky and the wind takes them. "You'll be ok." she tells us.

I just met AnnaLea's parents and they're so rude! They make AnnaLea and Clark do so many chores. AnnaLea hides us under her bed when her parents are around. When her parents aren't around, they're working at a little market about five miles away. I've been here for about two days and no sign of Miles, Nova, Erza or Owen. Right now I'm sitting on AnnaLea's bed with Clay. Now she knows that Clay is a boy because the way he uses the bathroom. She also found out that I'm a girl the same way. She is putting bow clips in my fur. They are a pretty purple color. She just finished brushing my fur. She finishes with my bows so I go and look in the full-length mirror in her room. I look pretty. I actually kinda like it. Now she's brushing Clay's hair.

"I'm gonna give you both a bath!" she says happily. She goes in the bathroom across from her room and

fills up the little bathtub. She takes the bows out of my fur. She puts me in the water. I actually sort of like it. It's nice and warm, but still wet. Then she puts Clay in the bath. He splashes around and water flies everywhere.

"Silly doggy!" AnnaLea says. She puts some soap in the water and stirs it with her hand. The soap becomes bubbles. Clay sneezes a couple of times. AnnaLea laughs. Clay splashes around in the water and hides in the bubbles.

"Let's pretend that our feet are stuck in sticky clay!" AnnaLea says excitedly. Clay barks twice. "Oh no I'm stuck!" AnnaLea screams while she's acting it out making it look like her feet are stuck. She stomps around. "This clay is so sticky!" AnnaLea complains. Clay barks again. If only she knew. Then we hear scratching at the door from downstairs. AnnaLea Maria runs into her bedroom and looks out the window. She comes back in to us. "There's no one there," she whispers.

She takes both of us out of the bath and dries us off quickly with one big towel. Then she hurries downstairs and peeks out the window by the door. "Another cat!" she says excitedly. She opens the door and lets it inside the house. I run downstairs with Clay right behind me. It's Moonlight standing right there. I hiss louder than I've ever hissed before.

"Oh I found you!" he says.

"Just stop it!" I tell him.

"What did I do?" he asks.

"Please bring us home!" I say in a mad voice.

"Why?" he asks.

"Well, you were the one he pushed me off the hill and then I fell into a wet, cold river!" I meow loudly.

"What are you two talking about?" AnnaLea asks sweetly. Cats can understand humans but humans can't understand cats. It's hard sometimes when you just want some food or water.

Moonlight stays with us. AnnaLea calls him Emerald. She also found out that he's a boy. Yes, it's the same way she found out that Clay is a boy and that I'm a girl.

"I'm bored out of my mind here." Moonlight complains.

"We won't let you leave unless you show us where the farm is," I tell him.

"Do I have to?" He drags out the word have.

"Yup," I say.

"What about the girl?" he asks.

"What about her?" I ask.

"You can't just leave her," Moonlight says.

"We'll leave her something to remember us," I tell Moonlight. "Oh, and I'm Sunlight and the puppy is Clay." I walk over to the door. "Open up!" I meow. To her it sounds like "Meow meowm meh!" AnnaLea runs over and opens the door.

"Put your paws in the mud," I tell them. We all run to the edge of the river. We stick our paws in the sticky icky mud. Then we run inside. I look under the cabinets that are close to the floor. I see a piece of paper lying under it. I pull it toward me with my paw. Then I hold the paper in my mouth and flip it over. We all put both of our paws on the paper. I shove it by the door. "C'mon," I say almost crying. "Let's go," I say with tears in my eyes.

Moonlight walks out the door first, then Clay, then me. Moonlight continues to walk and Clay and I keep following him. Seconds turn to minutes. Minutes turn to half hours. Then I see a bright orange wall over a hill. It was the barn! Clay and I run past Midnight. We run up the hill as fast as we can. Erza and Owen are sitting on the dirt next to the barn. They both look gloomy. Clay and I run faster and faster.

"Cway and Swunwite!" Owen yells as he sees us.

"I miss 'em too," Erza says which makes me feel weird. Us? She doesn't like me. Owen points over at us. Erza looks over and sees us.

"Sun! Clay!" she screams happily running over to us. She grabs us and hugs us so tight I can barely breathe. Owen runs over and hugs us too.

"Mwamwa! Dwaddy!" he yells. Nova and Miles run outside and run over to us. They hug us too. Then

Moonlight comes. Everyone looks over at him.

"A stray," Nova says.

"Can we keep him please, please, please, please, please?" Erza asks. The sun falls into the hills.

"I suppose." Nova says.

"Thwank you so mwuch!" Owen screams. The moon shines in the dark sky.

"Let's call him Moonlight, like the opposite of Sunlight," Erza says.

"Hi Moonwite," Owen says as he runs over to him and hugs him.

Miles Canlight, Nova Canlight, Erza Canlight, Owen Canlight, Clay Canlight, Moonlight Canlight and me. Moonlight looks over at me and winks and I wink back.

Mayday

By Lulu Gray, Grade 8

Shattuck-St. Mary's School, Faribault

The sun glowed over the vast cruise ship, lighting up its yards upon yards of ropes and ladders. Camila sighed with content, unfurling her legs over her chair, a Mai Tai dangling from her hand. She wore her favorite bikini, the one with pink polka dots, and a pair of large sunglasses that sat delicately on her nose. For just a moment, she could forget about the stresses of life at home. Her waning grandmother, her piles of student debt, her dull relationship. It was all swept away by the sea breeze that kept her cool but not too much so. She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, settled lower into the chair, and took a sip of her drink. She could hear the laughter of children in the pool, the cawing of seagulls, and the low, steady hum of the ship's engine. Her mom, the benefactor of the trip, sat beside her, face buried in yet another novel, skin shiny with sunscreen. Camila decided not to put as much on as her fretful mother, as she hoped she'd have a nice tan to boast to her coworkers next week. Not many could have that in the middle of February.

Camila set down her Mai Tai and pushed her glasses up, eager to get some rest before the night. She had just turned twenty-four and was more than excited to celebrate her birthday at the ship's one nightclub later. She knew she'd have to get at least a few hours rest before partying into the wee hours of the night. So, she let her head lull against the canvas deck chair and closed her eyes, dozing off into sleep.

Camila woke to the loud bang of a thunderclap. She startled out of her chair, grabbing her chest to steady her thumping heartbeat. The once bright sky had turned into a malevolent quilt of dark gray clouds, rumbling and flashing. She heard the slap of flip flop-laden feet running inside for safety from the storm. Her mom, already standing, looked panicked enough for the both of them. Camila found her wits and gathered her belongings quickly, casting a quick glance to the sky. She knew water and lightning were never a good combination and didn't want to be anywhere near the pool when it struck.

She sprinted for the door, but it seemed to be getting farther and farther away. When Camila began to lose her footing, she realized the ocean behind her was getting closer and closer. The ship was tilting over a giant wave, nearly perpendicular to the ocean. Camila grabbed onto a pole as the ship crested the wave and slammed back down into the water. Camila heard a distant bang and scrape from under her, most likely from the hull. The ship had hit something. Something big.

Camila suddenly found herself in a scene out of the Titanic. Alarms screeching, people running in all directions. Camila seized her mother's hand and joined the tide of people, a growing panic blossoming in her chest. Her mother was in her late fifties, and not nearly as surefooted as the teenagers and twenty-somethings around them. She saw the staff members in their green shirts shouting over the madness, directing and funneling people to lifeboats already waiting on the edge of the deck. Another boom of thunder resounded from the sky, eliciting screams from the passengers, and Camila herself. She took a moment to check the sky again, but got trampled by others, fervid to get a spot on the small crafts. Camila could see the icy apprehension on the staff's

faces--there weren't enough spots for everyone. Sinking was more uncommon than shark attacks, and they couldn't just let people into the water in life jackets with a brewing lightning storm above.

Camila dragged her mother behind her, pushing and shouting, gradually making their way towards a sleek gray boat with ten seats. A tall woman with a brown ponytail hustled people into it, fear etched into her face. She was one of the staff, and according to the boring protocol monotonously recited at the beginning of the cruise, she had the right to one of the seats.

Camila and her mother tried to muscle their way as far forward as they could, but a line had already formed in front of them, and they seemed close enough to make it on. Camila gripped the handle of her bag, knuckles turning white on the fabric. She thought of her phone, her clothes, and the rest of her belongings sitting idly in their cabin. She thought of all her mom's medication sitting there, too, some of which she needed every night. She was sick to her stomach, and not because of the rocking boat beneath their feet.

One by one, people filed on, clutching family members or random strangers, donning tear-stained cheeks and mortified expressions. It had begun to rain, making the deck slippery. The boat rocked, causing people to knock into one another in a painful clash of bones and bathing suits. The motion put Camila and her mom a few spots up in line. Hope filled her. They'd make it. They'd make it back to their little hotel in Florida, and eventually to their small little town in Wisconsin. This excruciating nightmare would finally be over.

However, as the line shrunk, Camila realized she'd done her math wrong. She and her mom had made it to the front, but eight seats were taken, and one of the vacant ones belonged to the tall woman looking expectantly at them. Camila looked at her mother and recognized the look in her watery eyes.

"No, Mom," Camila said firmly, voice cracking, "You go."

"What kind of mother would that make me?" she retorted with a stricken tone.

"No!" Camila shouted, stepping behind her mother, offering her up to the woman. She couldn't. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she left her sweet mother on the deck to die.

"I'll catch the next one. Go, Cammie," she said, face soft despite the whirlwind of emotions surrounding them. Camila risked a look down to the ocean, stomach dropping at its proximity. The ship could go down at any second. Her mom wouldn't make it. None of the people behind them would either.

"I'm sorry, ladies, but one of you has to step into the boat!" The woman shouted over the mayhem. Camila locked eyes with her mom, a million words spoken in one glance. The acceptance written on her mother's face made her nauseous.

Camila took another step back, but when her mom grabbed her wrist and pulled her forward, she stumbled to the edge of the deck. With surprising strength for an older woman, she shoved her daughter into the boat to the chagrin of the other passengers.

Camila screamed and cried, but her legs wouldn't propel her back onto the deck. She watched in mute horror as the tall woman climbed into the boat, casting it off the edge and using a rope to lower them down to the sea. From this angle, Camila could see how close the ship was to sinking into the churning depths of the water.

Camila caught sight of her mother leaning over the railing, a weepy smile on her face. Camila couldn't even function as the tall woman pushed away from the ship and screamed at the two men holding the oars to row as fast they could. Camila sobbed as the boat propelled away from the doomed cruise ship, lurching over the giant waves. Camila couldn't tear her eyes from the mammoth vessel as it slowly disappeared into the frothy water, taking her helpless mother with it.

Dragon Sales

By Riley Holets, Grade 10

New Prague High School, New Prague

A bell chimed merrily as the front door was pushed open. The store was quiet in all ways except the occasional flutter of a scaly wing. The man who walked in wore a tattered cloak with mud caked all over and boots that had seen better days. He trudged over to the counter at the back of the store and rang the bell. His cloak's hem found its way into his hands as he worried at it with gloved fingers. The storekeeper watched from behind a taller shelf as the man shifted his weight back and forth. The man's face was concealed beneath a heavy hood and glimpses under his cloak only revealed leather trousers and the hilt of a blade. I wonder what he could be waiting for, the storekeeper thought. He rang the bell again and the storekeeper remembered that she was the thing he was waiting for.

The storekeeper skidded around the shelf and slid to a stop just behind him. "Sorry for the wait, sir!" She plastered a cheery smile on her flushed face as the man spun around. "What can I help you with on this fine day?"

"Are you the owner?" a gruff voice asked from within the battered cloak.

"Yes indeed!" she chirped, rolling back on her heels. "Are you perhaps looking for a dragon or do you need supplies for your own? We recently acquired a new nail clipper, only ten percent of dragons turned it to ash!"

The man worried at his cloak's hem. "I need a dragon." He glanced around the small shop and took in the small dragons that hoarded the fuzz or pebbles in their cages.

"Of course, sir," she beamed. "What kind of dragon would you like? We have a Florentine Glen Roamer that just came in the other day. Or there's an Anery Cloud Skipper in the corner over there. Or there's a-

"I need a large dragon," the man interrupted with a harsh whisper. The sale of large dragons had been illegal for the past century and the man wasn't keen on going to prison again.

"Why didn't you say so?" The storekeeper laughed, going to the back room. Seconds later the man emerged holding a thick stack of papers. "What do you want it to hoard?"

"I'm not sure," the man said stiffly. "I've been commissioned to find a dragon to guard a keep."

The storekeeper frowned. "How boring," she sighed. This was the seventh customer looking for a guard dragon this month. "What type of location will this keep be in?"

"It is being built by Forenst, it's a small town about-

"I know it, my friend Blake lived there."

"Blake Smithson?"

"No, Blake Carpenter." The storekeeper went back to her papers, pushing the flying brown curls out of her face. "I have dragons that hoard stone, iron, fire, grass, wheat, cats, gravel, mortar and geese. I assume you want this dragon to be good with people, or is the keep going to be empty?"

"The keep will have people in it."

"Great, then that narrows it down to a dragon that hoards stone, iron, cats or geese." The storekeeper moved to the next question on the list. "Do you have a preference on color?"

"Grey or green?"

"That leaves either the dragon that hoards iron or the one that hoards geese."

"Then the one that hoards iron will do."

"Lovely," the storekeeper grinned, her eyes glinting mischievously. "That will be seven hundred gold, seventy silver and twenty-six coppers. Please sign the forms and read them carefully." She pushed a small stack of papers across the counter. "I'll get Eylenaie all ready to go. She is still small but she'll be full size in about a year. She can eat anything under the sun, except strawberries, carrots, alcohol, grapefruit, succulents, pastries or chocolate. She will want somewhere warm to sleep but..." the storekeeper's voice trailed off as she disappeared behind the curtain into the back room. The man gaped after the woman before looking at the small mountain of

papers he had to sign.

He reluctantly pulled a quill and ink out of his satchel and started on the documents. By the time the woman returned to the front he had made it through six out of 30 of the papers.

"How will you be paying today? I take services as well as coin; although I'll warn you that a dragon like Eylenaie will cost you a life of service and more, the debt would be astounding for your whole family." She leaned against the counter as he set aside the papers.

The man shivered as he remembered the price. He pulled the heavy purse that he had been given and started to take out a variety of small pouches. He pulled out seven yellow pouches, two grey pouches and a brown pouch. He shoved all seven yellow bags and a grey bag across the counter before counting out twenty silver coins from the leftover grey pouch and twenty-six coppers out of the brown one.

"That should cover it," the man stated, pocketing the remaining coin. "Where is the dragon?"

The woman smiled at the coin before reaching just beyond the curtain and pulled out a heavy iron cage with a dragon curled up inside with various daggers, earrings and tokens. Steely wings covered its small body as it snored into its hoard.

"Eylenaie will behave," the storekeeper said smiling at the winged alley cat-sized lizard. "The last ten pages of those papers are instructions on her specifically. She is picky about her iron so make sure you have the right kind for her hoard. Are you done signing it all?" The man nodded. "Perfect, then she is all yours."

The man gingerly took the heavy cage and reflected on what he had just done. "Why haven't you gone out of business yet?" he inquired of the woman.

Her grin widened. "I only sell small dragons and I have no idea how big they'll grow." She held up the papers he had just signed. "You signed it all yourself. I have no knowledge of how a dragon may turn out and if it does become large then I am at no fault. I've broken no laws."

The man gaped before stiffly walking out with the baby dragon in his hands. The small sleeping dragon would be his to care for until the keep was finished and the dragon was big enough to guard it. He tried not to think about the laws he had just broken.

The Dragon's Keep

By Riley Holets, Grade 10

New Prague High School, New Prague

"There is a keep in a faraway land guarded by a fearsome dragon and is said to be home to a handsome prince. The prince was born and raised in the keep and never had any interest in leaving. He enjoyed reading the crates of books that were sent to him by his father, the King and his brother, the Crown Prince. He learned many skills while cooped up. He could speak nearly every language, his skill with a bow was unmatched and his baking skills were something that bards would sing about in taverns until the sun broke over the horizon. He had only one complaint: he was lonely.

The servants who had raised him had all passed on or retired, leaving only their books and memories behind. His mother had been there for a while but passed before he had seen a full moon cycle. The birth had taken its toll. He had only the livestock and the ferocious dragon for company. To this day he awaits in his keep for someone to slay the dragon and free him." The bard finished the story as the surrounding knights laughed at the thought of a prince locked away in a tower. The bard glared at the patrons and curled a finger into one of his braids. None of them would suit the task the bard had in mind.

The merry little tavern was alight with the happy patrons and their heavy purses. The bard's bowl was starting to become full as well. He had just traveled leagues to verify the dragon's keep and was now stuck telling the story to non-believers. "They say that whoever frees the prince will gain the keep and all the land surrounding it. Quite the fortune, wouldn't you agree?" The bard inclined a dark eyebrow as he surveyed his

now silent audience.

One dark haired knight straightened, "Where did you say this keep was?"

The bard grinned, his teeth seemingly sharper than before. "About a two day's ride west from here, I'd say." A ginger haired knight stared deep into his drink before setting it aside, regarding the bard with careful consideration. The bard's lithe figure, dark hair and light blue eyes that seemed to glow in the low light, sending a shiver down the knight's spine. He stood up and sauntered over to the door.

"I'm heading back to the inn," he called to the other knights. "I have no interest in keeps or fairy tales." The knight had been lying. He was deeply interested and wanted to find the keep more than anything else in this world. He had heard the story told many times, traded in taverns all across the continent, and had been looking for the keep ever since he heard the first story. He couldn't imagine how lonely the prince must be.

Without another word to his companions, he saddled his horse and started the long trek to the Dragon's Keep and the prince who was held inside. The knight watched the surrounding countryside as he rode long into the night, and within no time at all, the keep was within sight.

He dismounted, tied his horse to the nearest tree, and began walking the remaining mile or so to the keep. Before he could get a stone's throw away from the gate, a large grey dragon slithered over the castle wall, eyeing him with hungry fascination. It snapped its jaws at his sword, cleanly disarming the knight without causing him any harm.

It quickly jumped back up to the wall and over into the courtyard while the knight gaped at the strange behavior and wondered why he still had his hands. Not a moment later the gate opened and a fair-skinned boy peered out. "Would you like some tea?" he called as he adjusted his tunic. The bewildered knight nodded, relaxing at the handsome boy's appearance, and stepped forward to follow the boy into the keep. The heavy iron gate slammed shut behind them, sealing them in.

They passed the dragon in the courtyard as it curled its long tail around a pile of weapons and armor. The knight watched the boy move with grace as he led the knight to a well-lit sitting room with two chairs and a small table that held a platter of sweets and a steaming pot of tea.

"I apologize for Eyle, she likes to take things that aren't hers." The boy spoke with a lilting voice as he settled in an armchair, gesturing for the knight to sit across from him. "If you would like it back I can try later this evening." The knight gaped as the boy picked up a scone from the platter and savored the taste. He poured them both tea and sipped the steaming liquid while studying the surprised knight.

"Are you the prince?" the dumbstruck knight asked, watching the pale hands curl around the small teacup. The knight hoped this boy was the prince, he had been searching for so long.

"Indeed." The boy looked to the windows with a disdainful look before setting down his cup. "I am Alder Kinsley Bryant Avaniant, son of his highness King Eldridge Torentian Andriet Avaniant, brother to the Crown Prince Slade Blakesley Grantoun Avaniant and so on and so forth. Who are you?"

"I am Sir Alex Woodell," the knight sputtered. "From Sorlin."

Alder attempted a smile. "You are here to 'free' me, yes?" Alex nodded. "That's unfortunate because I am already free. Eyle is my dragon, therefore there is no reason to slay her. I have no reason nor desire to leave, so you may leave and go about your life as you please."

"I heard a rumor that the person who frees you gets the keep and the surrounding land,"

Alex countered, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Only half of that is true." The prince lounged back in his chair. "One can achieve the keep and the land if they marry me. As I am already free, if one wishes to obtain my possessions, one must become my possession or in this case, my lover."

Alex sank back in his chair and thought quietly to himself for a long while. "Are you open to the idea of marriage?" he asked, sipping the tea the prince had poured. Alder stiffened.

"I don't care much," Alder shrugged. "The chance of a young maiden attempting to save me from a dragon is slim and the chance of a man wanting to commit such a scandalous act is even slimmer."

"I am a man willing to commit a scandalous act," Alex nearly bit his tongue as he spoke.

"If you'll have me of course."

Alder's pale face flushed to match the raspberries growing in brambles all across the countryside. His golden hair fell over his forehead as his gaze fixated on his boots. "You just met me, Sir Woodell. What makes you think you want to spend your life with me?" Alder stared at the strange knight in utter fascination. He was handsome for a knight, with his red hair and almond colored eyes that were filled with simple but pure adoration.

"I think I would enjoy your company for the rest of my mortal life." Alex smiled and gently grabbed Alder's hand. "Wouldn't it be the wrong to leave you here with only your dragon? I could not imagine enduring such loneliness."

The prince smiled and blushed deeper. "You would have to stay in the keep with me. Forever. I cannot leave this keep and live."

Alex looked into the prince's green eyes. "Then I will stay." He pulled away to kneel in front of Alder. "I, Sir Alex Woodell hereby pledge my life, my soul, and my love, to Prince Alder

Kinsley Bryant Avaniant, Son of King Eldridge--"

"Please stop," Alder interrupted. "You don't have to say my full title." He muttered, hiding behind his hands. This knight will be the death of me! Alder thought, wanting to vanish into a void of embarrassment.

Alex's smile grew. "I pledge myself entirely to you and I will care for you in all ways until the end of my life in this world." The knight finished and encased the prince in a warm embrace.

Prince Alder couldn't help but tear up at the sudden kindness. "Thank you, Sir Alex." He whispered into his new companion's neck. He wouldn't be alone. The prince thought of the empty hallways and the dusty rooms and the cold kitchen and the library that had fell victim to Alder's desperate wish to escape. Alder smiled up at Alex's freckled face. "I guess you're my responsibility now."

Alex smiled, "That's right." He carefully captured the prince's lips. "I'm very glad I met you, your highness."

"Drop the formalities," the prince smiled. "I've haven't been addressed as 'your highness' since I was old enough to care for myself."

Alex laughed, "I know, my prince." He hugged Alder close and whispered in his ear. "I've loved you from the moment I first heard your story, Alder. Please let me stay with you and protect you until my mortal life ends."

Alder buried his face in Alex's shoulder and muttered, "You can stay."

The Mother and The Fae

By Riley Holets, Grade 10

New Prague High School, New Prague

The ash grove seemed to glow with the light of the moon as a mist started to curl around the ash and oak trees lining the perimeter. I shivered against the chill that slipped into my cloak and wrapped around my heart. I gazed around me, waiting for any sign of the creatures of the wood. The faerie ring before me had not changed since I came out at sunset. By now the moon was almost at its peak in the sky. I waited a bit longer, staring out at the trees and hoping beyond hope that some creature would step out and accept my bargain. The longer I staved off the cold, the more hope I lost. The creatures of the forest would accept my bargain, I thought. If only they'd show themselves.

Just when my eyes started to grow blurry and my toes started to pinch in my boots, a figure slipped out between the sweet briar that lined the grove like a daggered fence. I could barely make out its form as it made its way closer to me. Its impossibly thin form moved with the grace and determination of a wild cat that had found its prey. Its brackish colored antlers scratched at the nearest tree branches in a sinister scrtch scrtch scrtch. Large moon bright eyes barely registered in my sleep-deprived mind as I struggled to my feet, wincing at how stiff

my legs had become. The creature tilted its delicate head to the side and gazed at me curiously. A grin slashed across its face as it took in my gold laced cloak and silken dress.

"Your name," it purred, holding out its delicate white clawed hand.

I wrapped my hands in my cloak to avoid the temptation of touching the strange creature.

"I have a name, one you likely have no need of," I said politely. My words clouded the air in front of me. I drew a shaky breath before staring into the creature's glowing eyes. "I have a request." The creature stood taller and grinned wider.

"What might be your request?" It settled on a nearby stone and seemed more inclined to nap than hear my request. Yet those moonshine eyes were fixed on my shivering form in a way that refused to be anything less than attentive.

"There is a baby, a newborn," I started. "It is the king's son. I ask if it would be possible for it to be blessed by the Fair Folk of this forest."

"What you say is possible," the fae glanced away for a moment. "Of course such things do have a price."

"What would be the price if one were to ask for such a thing?" I inquired, tightening my shaking hands in the folds of my dress.

"That would depend." The faerie purred. "Who are you to ask such things of the fair folk?"

"The king's mistress and his son's mother. I ask that my son be blessed to wander the forests safely without any harm of the fae's malice or mischief."

"Malice?" The fae questioned. "What malice have I caused thee, your Royal Highness? As I recall, you are the one disturbing my travels."

I stiffened, noticing the web the creature was weaving around its words. "Though you have done nothing," I held the quiver of my words in my chest. "There are those among the Fae who are not as pleasant to those of my land."

The Fae watched me carefully, "If a price were to be proposed," the creature paused. "In return for the protection of your son, thy next child would be claimed by the fae after its birth. A life for a life, as it goes."

"I understand," I muttered, as exhaustion clawed at my entire being. "Are you offering this

"Indeed." The creature grinned wider than any moment before, and its slender face seemed to split. "Are you accepting this bargain?"

"Do I have your word that no harm, physical or otherwise will come to my son from the Fae?" I shook away the fatigue encroaching on my vision.

It extended its clawed hand once more. "You have my word that no harm will come to your son from me or Inine as long as the next child you bear is given to me in return." A rush of wind tore through the grove as I shook hands with the faerie. "The deal is in effect. Once your next child is born, bring it to this grove and I will accept it." With that, the faerie disappeared into the morning mist and the sun started to break over the horizon.

I stumbled back down the path, out of the woods and back to the castle. By the time I crossed the village market, the sun was far above the horizon and my legs screamed against each stride. I slipped in the servant door and almost had to crawl up the stairs to my son's room. I pushed open the door and dragged myself into the chair by his cradle.

He was sleeping so peacefully. I brushed the fuzzy blonde strands of hair back on his head and smiled. He would be safe from the fae at the very least.

I only noticed I fell asleep in the chair when a servant woke me up. "Queen Naran, His Highness has been looking for you. He is in his chamber with the midday tea."

I stiffly clambered out of the chair and winced as I caught the scent of my clothing. "I think I will clean up before joining him." I slipped my hand out of the folds of my dress and walked into the hall. "Please let the king know that I will be with him shortly."

Moments later, I was striding through the door to my husband's chambers with the good news in hand. King Eldridge was a fairly large man but he was also battle-hardened and gentle with the things he cared for. I couldn't help recalling the day we met whenever I looked at him. I remembered the crowded market and

the flower stall that he pushed me into by mistake. I remember his gentle hands as they helped me up and apologized a thousand times. I shook myself back to reality as I took in my husband's burning gaze.

"Where have you been?" he inquired, the thinly veiled rage visible in his hazel eyes.

"I was in the forest all night," I chirped, moving across the room to my husband's desk. "I made a deal with the Fair Folk, our son will come to no harm while he travels the forest. Now he will survive despite the curse. Your knights and soldiers will protect him from harm in this realm and the Fae shall protect him from their realm."

Eldridge looked at me warily. "What was the price?" He asked softly.

"Nothing of consequence," I muttered, spinning my hands in my skirt.

"What was the price, Naran?" he demanded, crossed around his desk and grabbed me by the shoulders. Shaking me he cried, "What was the price to protect my child from death?! What did you give away?"

"The next child I bear will be given to the Fae," I screeched, huffing as Eldridge's grip loosened and his hands fell to his sides. He stumbled to his chair and collapsed into it.

He was silent for a few moments as I folded myself into another chair. The silence seemed to yawn for a century before he spoke with shaky breaths. "Our next child will be given to the Fae."

"Yes." I looked away from his wide eyes and gaping mouth. "The deal has been made and there is no way to avoid it now."

We sat in festering silence as he held his head in his hands and glared at the wood grains of his desk. Then he was writing, the ink stained his fingers as he hastily drenched the quill. Moments later he was calling one of the guards in and sending them off to the stonemasons and ironsmiths. I watched his frantic movements curiously.

"What are you doing, my love?" I heaved a sigh, feeling as last night's excursion took its toll.

"We will build a new keep," He exclaimed. "From iron and stone. This will be the guard to shield us from your mistake." His eyes were wildly roaming the papers on his desk.

I crossed the room and cupped his face. "My love, there is no avoiding the Fae. I have made a deal and I will honor it until my death." I kissed him gently and pulled away. "It is a mother's duty to protect her son. I know what I did was the right thing."

He gazed at me sadly. "I did not make this deal." He gently engulfed my hands in his and pressed his forehead to mine. "I will protect our children no matter the cost. That is what is right. I will not sell a child to death for another child to live. Although I cannot undo your deal I can do everything in my power to stop it from coming to pass." By the time he finished, I was sobbing into his chest. He held me close as I cried and thought of my son and the unborn child that I would someday bring into this world.

What have I done?

If You Get a Hamburger at McDonald's

By Andree Jakovich, Grade 2

Hoover Elementary, North Mankato

If you get a hamburger at McDonald's, you will ask for a bag. When you get the bag, you will put it in your car. On the way home, you will worry if the bag is contaminated with the Coronavirus 19. So you will throw away the bag in your garbage can.

Then the garbage truck will come and pick it up. Now you feel happy and responsible! Soon you realize that the virus is on your hands. Now you will go and wash your hands in your kitchen sink with soap and water for 20 seconds.

Unfortunately your plates that were supposed to be washed yesterday are still in your sink and contaminated. Therefore you cannot eat your next meal.

So then, you will go and get a hamburger at McDonalds.

This is just a story so please be responsible and stay home! Happy eating!

Time Twist

By Cameron Johnson, Grade 3
North Elementary, St. Peter

Jack Rogers is a timid kid. He sticks out of the crowd. Two minutes until school is officially over. It felt like an eternity. Just when he thought he wasn't leaving, RIINNG!!!! Jack bolted out of the room like a cheetah seeing its prey. When he got to his house there was a moving truck and his mom was waiting in their car.

"There you are!" said Jack's mom, Angela. "Sorry I didn't tell you this morning."

"It's ok, mom," said Jack.

"Alright, bud get in the car," said Angela.

"Are we moving to the country?" asked Jack.

"Yep!" said Angela.

Jack fell asleep. Thirty minutes later he was awoken by his mother's call. "Jack! Were here!" Jack got out of the car.

"Go explore!" said Angela.

Jack was walking around the house when he saw a pull-down staircase. 'Must be an attic,' he thought. Jack got a stool and pulled the staircase down and went in the attic.

"What?" There was a watch in the middle of the floor! Jack was curious. He poked it and it started to glow! Then it started floating! Jack saw a button in the middle of the watch. There was a rat scurrying across the floor. He pressed the button on the watch. Suddenly, the rat stopped moving. Jack got close to the rat. Still, it didn't move. Jack poked it. It didn't move. Jack went downstairs and he saw his mom getting the boxes out of the car. But she was frozen like a statue. She wasn't moving.

"Mom?" Jack asked. She didn't respond. Jack was terrified. Jack pressed the button again. She started moving again!

"Hey bud!" said Angela. Jack decided to keep the watch a secret. "Want to help me?" asked Angela.

"Sure," said Jack. "Ungh! This ones pretty heavy!"

They finished unpacking. Jack went in his new room. Jack pressed the button again and went to the cupboards where the candy was. Suddenly, Jack felt the house rumbling. It was coming from the basement. Jack was shaking.

He didn't want to go down there but curiosity got the best of him. Before he knew it he was down in the basement face to face with a gigantic red-faced spirit. Jack was terrified.

"Aaaauhh aaaaauhh choo!" The spirit sneezed and there was a bunch of smoke. When the smoke cleared there was a short stubby ghost.

"AHHHHH!" Jack basically screamed out his lungs. "Who? Who are you?" Jack asked.

"The names Red. And I'll be accompanying you on your mission," said Red.

"What? What mission?" Jack asked.

"To save the spirit world," said Red.

"Come again?" Jack asked.

"To save the spirit world," said Red.

"Why me?"

"Because you're the one that found the watch," said Red.

"Fair enough," said Jack.

"Alright, follow me," said Red. He led them to a painting in the basement. He picked the painting up and there was a tunnel behind the painting. "That's the way to the portal."

"Ok," said Jack. Jack tried look at the watch but it was backwards. He saw something on the back of the watch. It said: HOW TO TRAVEL THROUGH TIME. JUST THINK OF

WHAT TIME YOU WANT TO BE AT AND POOF! YOU'LL BE THERE!

"Wow!" Jack said. Jack thought of when he would be at the portal. POOF! He made it there before Red.

"Shouldn't you be tired after walking that long?" said Red. Jack decided to keep it a secret that he traveled through time.

"Nope!" said Jack. "I've got as much energy as a case of batteries!"

"Alright," said Red. "Let's go!" Red and Jack jumped through the portal.

"AHHHHH!" Jack screamed. They appeared at a place that looked like New York. Red showed him that darkness was taking over ghost city.

"How am I supposed to get rid of the darkness?" asked Jack.

"You defeat evil lord Ghastromis."

"How strong is he?" Jack asked in a shaky voice.

"Don't worry," Red said. "We have a special sword for you. It will grant great power to whoever is worthy."

"How do you know I'm worthy?" asked Jack.

"I don't know," said Red. "We'll just give it a shot."

"Ok," said Jack. Red led them to a shack in an alley way.

"The sword is in there," said Red. Jack went inside the shack and he held the sword. He felt a huge power surge.

"I feel great!" said Jack. His strength increased by 500 percent. His speed increased by 400 percent. His health increased by 100 percent.

"Take me to him," said Jack. Red led him to Central Park. There was Ghastromis.

"You're going down, Ghastromis!" said Jack.

"What is the meaning of this!" yelled Ghastromis. They had an epic fight. But Jack ended the battle by slicing Ghastromis in half.

"Serves you right," Jack mumbled.

"Whoa!" Every ghost started cheering.

"Thank you," said Red. Red teleported Jack back to his house. Jack totally forgot about his mom. Jack unpaused time.

"Ready for bed?" asked Angela.

"Yup!" said Jack.

Responsibilities First!

By Katrin E. Loftin, Grade 3

Washington Elementary, Mankato

One warm summer day, Liza was washing dishes as she had been told. She looked past the laced curtains and the filthy window and pushed her brown hair from her eyes and saw a butterfly float by. Interested, Liza followed it to the bright, inviting, big woods behind her house.

There she then saw a strange-looking treehouse upon a tree. Curiosity got the better of her and she climbed up the ladder to see what was inside. Inside, there was a pile of coins in a satin bag resting in a velvet lined wooden chest surrounded by beautiful gems! There was a lovely orange flower, her mother's favorite, a tulip.

Liza hadn't been keeping track of time, so it was dark by the time she got home. She returned home late and went straight to bed, completely forgetting about the chore she was told to do.

The next day, she asked her mom to come and see what she'd found. "Mom! Mom! Come see what I've found!" she said. But Liza realized, too late, that she had forgotten all about her chore.

Her mom then said "No, Liza. I can't. I'm busy finishing the chore YOU never finished. Now I have to go get this week's groceries. Spend some time in your room and think about your actions," said her mother. Liza was grounded and sent to her room for the rest of the day.

In her room, she sat at her window, thinking about the choices she had made. Liza desperately wanted to

show her mother all of the wonderful things she had found. But she wouldn't be able to while she was stuck in her room, and her mother was doing the housework.

But then, a lightbulb turned on in her head. She said to herself, "Maybe if I help my mother with the housework, she will have enough time to come see the things I found!" So she made a mental list of jobs that would be crucial to finish in order for her mom to have some free time and set about her work.

First, Liza cleaned the bathroom, she even swept and mopped the tile floor. Next, she vacuumed the carpet in her bedroom. Then, she dusted the furniture in the living room and polished the hard wood floors. She worked and worked around the house to help her mother, folding laundry and sweeping floors, until all the work was done. Then just before her mom came home, she scurried back into her room.

When her mother came to the door, she was in such shock that she almost dropped all the week's groceries. "Oh my goodness Liza! Did you do all this?" exclaimed her mother.

"Yeah I did!" Liza replied. "I did this because I felt bad that I didn't do my chore yesterday, so I did this to give us some time to spend together." Liza exclaimed.

Liza's mother told her, "Since you have done all the housework, after dinner I will come into the woods and you can show me what you found."

"Hurray," Liza cheered.

After dinner, they washed up the dishes together. They put on bug spray and some shoes, and headed into the woods. When they arrived at their destination, her mother exclaimed in delight, her beautiful brown eyes glistening, "Liza! This is wonderful! Look at these precious stones!"

"It's amazing, right?" asked Liza.

"This is remarkable! Thank you so much for making it possible for me to see this wonderful place!"

They walked home, hand in hand, and watched the sun go down. That night, as Liza lay in bed, she thought about the day. She considered the valuable lesson she learned. Work first, then play. And she drifted off to sleep.

Everyone Should Have a Home

By Keisha Navarrete, Grade 4

Lakeview Elementary School, Albert Lea

Today I am going to be telling you about one right I think everyone should have. I think people should have a home and here is why. I went to Grace's house and when I looked outside the window, I saw someone on the side of the street. It was a homeless guy just sitting there, with no shelter.

"It is so sad how lots of people don't have homes," I said to Grace sadly, still looking at the homeless person.

"Yeah, I know it is so sad, I wish we could do something, but what?" Grace asked, nodding her head in agreement.

"If only we could do something," I said. "We should go ask your mom, maybe she'll know what to do." I hoped her mom would have an idea for us.

"Yeah, let's go!" Grace said, wanting to only talk to her mom but not the president or someone else, that would make her nervous. Grace was always nervous talking to people outside of her family. We walked out of the room towards her mom who was in the kitchen cooking.

"Hey Mom, Keisha and I were thinking that we could help homeless people, but we don't know what to say and who to talk to," Grace said while walking over to the table where I was already sitting.

"Also, we are too nervous to say anything to anyone else," I added, finishing Grace's sentence.

"I disagree, you guys can call the Governor of Minnesota and say something. For example, you could say, every day I see a homeless person at the edge of the street and no one does anything. We should do something about it because it is not fair," Grace's mom said.

"But we are scared," Grace and I said at the same time.

"Okay, then take turns pretending I am the Governor of Minnesota and repeat almost exactly what I said to you guys," Grace's mom said encouragingly.

"You go first because you are the guest," Grace said to me.

"Okay, I will go first. My friend and I keep seeing homeless people on the edge of the street every day. It is not fair and it is about time to do something about it," I said trying to remember everything Grace's mom said. "Now it is your turn," I told Grace with a smirk.

"I have been seeing a homeless guy on the street every day and it is not fair. We need to do something about it." Grace said probably thinking that I would not actually talk to the governor.

"Now choose who is going to talk to the governor," Grace's mom said proudly seeing that the girls wanted to help the problem of homelessness.

"You can," Grace and I said to each other at the same time.

"Fine, I guess I can do it," I said to Grace giving in because I know she is shy.

"Okay, practice what you will say to me," Grace said happily now that she knew she didn't have to be our spokesperson.

I stood up and took a deep breath and started, "My friend and I keep on seeing a homeless person on the side of the street. He is there every day even in the cold weather and no one does anything about it. So we are. We think everyone should have at least somewhere to stay like a homeless shelter. Is that good?"

"I think it is perfect. What do you think mom?" Grace replied then quickly looked at her mom.

"I think it is good. It could use some work, but it is good. You guys go practice that and come back when you think it is ready," Grace's mom said getting back to cooking.

"Okay," we said together running to Grace's room. Almost an hour later Grace and I returned to the kitchen.

"I am ready to call the Governor of Minnesota," I said confidently.

"Okay, the phone is ringing," Grace's mom said, giving me the phone.

"Hello, I am Keisha Navarrete. My friend Grace Goskeson and I keep on seeing a homeless guy at the side of the street and we feel bad. No one has done something about it and we think it is time someone does something about this." I take a small pause. "There should be a homeless shelter for a lot of people where people donate things like food, clothes and much more. It will be one big building," I said. I was still nervous and trying to remember everything.

"Yes, that is a great idea!" The governor paused and my heart started pounding. "We will put the building by the Circle Park and I will be the first one to donate food and clothes. But don't forget this will be one of your responsibilities if you want to do this. I will meet you there in about three weeks," the governor said while I tried not to scream with amazement as he hung up the phone.

"AAAAAHHH!" I screamed in joy. "The governor said yes. It will be by the Circle Park and the governor will be the first to donate!" I said, still in shock.

"What? It worked? The governor said yes? Oh my gosh, this is crazy!" Grace said jumping up and down.

"I knew you guys could do it, now we have to celebrate!" Grace's mom said, so proud of us.

"We should go out for ice cream and have a sleepover," Grace and I said at the same time.

A couple weeks later, we met the governor. "Nice to meet you Grace and Keisha. This is what we have worked on so far. How big should we make it?" the governor asked us.

I pushed Grace with my shoulder. "About three stories high and about 200 hundred feet by 200 hundred feet," Grace said not really ready to answer.

"How many rooms?" the governor asked, writing everything down.

"About ten to fifteen for each story," I answered before Grace could.

"Okay, I will tell the workers," the governor said, walking to the construction boss. "Hey, I want this to be three stories tall. Each story is 200 hundred feet by 200 hundred feet, and don't forget ten to fifteen or more rooms for each story."

"I will tell the workers and have them start that right now," said the construction worker, agreeing with everything the governor had said.

Once the shelter was built and school started, Grace and I were struggling at first because we had a lot of responsibilities. We had to go to school, get our homework done and help run the homeless shelter. Neither of us had time to do other things like go on our phones, watch videos on Netflix, or play games which we really wanted to do. Grace's mom reminded us that we had to manage our time, so we got our responsibilities done faster. After a couple of weeks, we got the hang of it and it was really easy for us. We were busy kids but it was worth it because more people having a home was an important right.

All Are Home

By Leah Proehl, Grade 9

Maple River High School, Mapleton

Akachi rested her back against the cold plastic of the bus stop. Her eyes scanned the road, wandering over the terrain looking for a bus to take her home. Her fingers clutched her coat, drawing it nearer to her. Maybe if the bus got here soon she could be home by dinner.

The rain hit the ground echoing like thunder. The street seemed washed out and you couldn't see the other end. There was a dreary grey haze settling over the town that almost seemed foreboding.

Akachi could almost feel the trees staring at her. Of course she knew it was dumb, trees don't have eyes, and so therefore cannot stare. She knew this, but yet she cautiously scanned the road keeping each tree in check. She tried so hard to explain to her mother how the trees stared at her, as if waiting for her to be vulnerable, and that would be when they were to strike. How were they going to strike? She knew not. All she knew is the day the trees catch her, she will cease to exist in this reality

She knew she wasn't safe, she really never was, but how could she explain the growing feeling of dread in her gut? A feeling that had crept up ever so slowly but so suddenly seemed upon her, seeming to choke her and tug at her as if prompting to tear her to pieces. Maybe that was the issue. There was no good way to explain it.

Her breathing became uneven as the feeling overtook her. Just the thought of it seemed to want to drag her into the ground. 'Join us,' it seemed to say. 'Join us in our suffering!'

She felt its tendrils inch from her gut to her chest, wrenching her heart with fear. Further up it went, covering her mouth, preventing her from screaming or from getting even a whiff of fresh air. 'Join us,' it sang. It continued to sing and sing, but it was no longer a song she wanted to listen to. It seemed to dig deep into her eardrums and fester, letting the shrewd song sit and rot. It sang and danced and taunted her.

Where was the bus? The bus would set her straight. Drag her out of her mind and back into her real life. Where was the bus?

The feeling gripped her tighter, holding her as if she would slip away, which she felt almost certain she would. She cast a glance to the sky, praying to whatever god may be out there. Her body gasping for air that would never reach her in her grand illusion. The panic was setting in, she thrashed and tried to cry out for help, but the feeling just got worse and more foreboding and it felt as if all good things had been smothered out of her existence. Then, just like that, in the snap of a finger, it was gone.

Here she was. Akachi Slecht. Just sitting at a bus stop, gasping for air, with her groceries. She is alive. She is ok. It has released its grip. She clutched her jacket tighter, her fingers shaking and wrinkling the usually smooth fabric. She felt tense. Her teeth were clenched together as if trying to restrain from screaming. Her eyes were wide, still scanning for the bus as if looking for escape.

She shouldn't have put off grocery shopping this long. As they say, 'save it for a rainy day,' but look where that has gotten her. Her eyes kept drawing over this one specific tree. A large willow with seemingly grey vines and a large knot where the trunk splits, twisting like a tumor and digging into the bark as if it were something unnatural. The roots dug into the ground as if they were trying to rip the topsoil from the ground. There was something carved into the bark, Akachi thought it looked Chinese but she didn't know Chinese so she couldn't say for sure.

If only she had gone out earlier that week. Instead of laying in her bed unable to find the will to move, she should have tried harder to force herself to get up and go out. She would have gotten groceries. Could have. She scolded herself for it, but still lied there and did nothing. She wanted to get up, to go out, maybe treat herself to a new book, or go out to eat. Instead, she sat at home, wishing that she could get up.

Maybe she wouldn't be here if she hadn't put off shopping until all she had left was a sour cream container full of old parade candy. Maybe if she had just ordered groceries online and just gone and picked them up.

Akachi laughed bitterly to herself. It got drowned out by the rain. The rain was pounding. Echoing in her mind. Jumbling her thoughts. Akachi didn't know what time of day it was. It wasn't bright out but it wasn't dark. That could be due to light pollution, however. She also didn't know how long she had been waiting for the bus. It could have been ten

minutes, it could have been an hour. All Akachi knew was that it was getting colder. Her fingers wrapped themselves in her coat, feeling miserably numb. Her teeth gritted together. Maybe she should have walked, but isn't that what life's about? Choosing a path and reliving the other through what ifs and maybes?

Akachi tilted forward, looking down the road for the bus. She was feeling slightly unsettled. Not as unsettled as her last episode, but she felt if she stayed too long, the trees would reach out and give their final judgement. The longer she sat there, the longer Akachi regretted putting grocery shopping off so long. Her Mami always told her to get her chores done, and to not wait. Her Mami always said, "If you put it off too long, it will just cause more problems 'Kachi." At this point, Akachi wished she would have listened.

"I promise I'll listen next time, Mami," Akachi muttered to herself, barely audible over the rain.

A loud rumbling filled the streets. A bright light waved its way throughout the buildings, and Akachi feared it was the devil coming to rid this world of her. This was in no way a rational thought, but Akachi was well aware that something was watching her even if the trees were not. She looked up to the sky to pray to the silent god one more time before the bus rounded the corner.

This did not look like the usual bus, but it was a bus, and it was on her route, so it was good enough. Akachi knew it was probably just another company trying to make profit.

She gathered up her groceries and removed her bus pass from her pocket. Hopefully this company accepted it since she had no small bills.

She rushed on the bus, hoping it was warm, and showed her pass to the driver. The driver was a plump man with spiky hair and a scowl, he looked like he might have been to prison once or twice, but he didn't stop her from sitting down.

The bus was empty, aside from an old, Chinese looking woman. The bus was filthy, dirt smeared on a portion of the seats, some of the windows couldn't even be seen out of due to grime. The lights needed to be replaced, they were a dull yellow and they flickered every other minute or so.

Akachi didn't see but there were mice living in the back corner, and if you looked close enough, there were splatters of blood everywhere. Even if Akachi had noticed this, she probably wouldn't have cared much. At least she was going home.

Akachi settled into one of the cleaner seats and set her groceries down beside her. She tried to look out the window, outside was cleaner than this rat's van, but the window was muddled with what Akachi hoped was mud. She let out a small sigh. The trees couldn't watch her when she was on the bus. She didn't know how it worked exactly, but if the trees could really see, Akachi doubted they could see her on the bus for more than a second before it sped away. Akachi sat back and closed her eyes.

"May I sit here child?" Akachi's eyes shot back open. Couldn't she get a moment of rest? She looked over and saw the other woman, gesturing to the seat next to Akachi's.

That seat was too close. A stranger should not sit that close, but what damage could this woman possibly do. Akachi moved her bag, allowing the woman to sit.

"You seem stressed," the old woman cooed as she sat down. "You going home?"

Akachi just nodded, fiddling with the plastic bag her groceries were in, tying knots in the handle. "Yeah," Akachi's voice was quiet, she didn't want to bother the driver. "It's been a long day."

The woman nodded, "Well soon you'll be able to rest forever. As long as you want." She nodded again before promptly adding, "When you are home."

Akachi also nodded, "I guess I will." She sighed, knowing she has due dates coming up and that she has to work on those assignments. She won't be resting anytime soon. "Are you going home?" She glanced at the woman.

"We all go home on this bus. All of us." She had a solemn look in her gaze. Akachi didn't like it.

She got up, "Excuse me, I think we're at my stop." They were not at her stop. She could not tell where they were. She tried to push past the woman, but she couldn't make it without accidentally hurting the woman.

The lights started feeling too bright, boring into her skull, seemingly burning her flesh. It beat down upon her as if she were in a fiery desert. That when Akachi realized this bus was not headed home. Not now, not ever.

"The trees are calling you darling." The old lady's eyes, once a warm brown, now lime green with slitted pupils that seemed to stare into Akachi's soul. Her skin has soured to an ashy grey and seemed to cling to her form as if it was merely draped over her and pinned at the neck. She was not human, "We are all home here. We want you to join us."

The voices started to sing.

Akachi didn't know where they came from, but they sang a melancholy melody that seemed to shatter reality. 'Join us, Join us, Join us.'

She tried to run. She tried to get to the door, but something held her back. It was as if there were a thousand forces tugging on her clothes, but they weren't really there, not if you were a bystander looking in, and Akachi only had time to wonder if this is what the final judgement feels like before she is gone. Akachi Becht was never found. If only she hadn't put off grocery shopping. If only she had done her chores when they needed to be done.

The Road Trip

By Claire Roering, Grade 5

Jefferson Elementary, Mankato

"Look at that sunset," my best friend Lilli said. It was one of those warm spring nights that you could just tell that summer was on its way, but the light breeze made me shiver a little.

"We should probably go inside and keep packing," I told Lilli.

"Alright," she replied as we walked inside. Lilli and I sat down on my bed.

"I can't believe we get to stay here for three whole days," Lilli said.

"I know I can't wait," I said excitedly. We were looking at a brochure for a hotel my uncle owned all the way in Pennsylvania. He invited us to go along with him on his next trip there. It was a no brainer to go because my mom and dad had to work all spring break anyways.

"I just looked up the drive time and it said it would only take about 22 hours to get there," Lilli said.

We leave for the trip tomorrow and we had barely anything packed. I pulled out a polaroid camera from my drawer. I love photography and pictures. I have over a million of Lilli and me. After all, we've been best friends ever since third grade which means that's four years worth of pictures.

"Don't forget the spring break bucket list because even if we're not here in North Dakota we can still do some of the stuff in Pennsylvania," Lilli said.

"Ya we can't forget that!" I said. The bucket list had all sorts of fun things to do on it like swimming, staying up all night and other fun things to do over spring break. We started the bucket list the year we became friends so it was very important to us. Lilli and I finished packing so we went downstairs and watched movies all night until we fell asleep. We woke up to a loud alarm set on my phone.

"I'm so tired," I said as I looked at Lilli. Her eyes looked foggy and she looked like she was not quite fully awake yet. "Come on let's go!" I said while getting up from the couch and pulling Lilli up with me.

"Ugh I don't want to get up," she said tiredly.

"Let's go, it will be fun!" I looked at the clock and it read 4:32 a.m. Lilli and I ran up the steps to my bedroom and got dressed in sweatpants and t-shirts. There was no need to dress fancy if we were just going to be in a truck all day. I put on my green North Dakota sweatshirt and Lilli wore her red one. We brought our suitcases downstairs and sat in the kitchen eating cereal for breakfast.

"Ah, I'm so excited I just can't wait!" Lilli said excitedly.

"I know me too. I've never been to his hotel," I said while picking up my spoon.

Just then we heard a loud obnoxious honk coming from a dark blue truck in our driveway.

"That's him," I laughed. We picked up our bags and suitcases and walked outside to my uncle Gary's truck.

"Hey girls!" Gary said.

"Hi uncle Gary!" I said while opening his truck door.

"So, are you girls excited?" He asked. Lilli and I looked at each other.

"YES!" We both said while climbing into the back seats. We buckled up and got on the road.

"Alright here we go!" Gary said as we backed out of our driveway.

"This is going to be the best spring break ever! I can't wait to get there!" I said.

A couple hours later me and Lilli were playing MASH in the back seat, when all of a sudden we were bumped out of our seats.

"What was that?" Lilli asked.

"Well it looks like we hit a big pothole. I need to check the tires to make sure none of them popped," Gary said. We pulled over on the side of the road. He got out of the truck and started to look at each tire carefully.

"Look over there," Lilli said while staring out her window.

"Woah, look at that pond!" I said to Lilli.

"I know! Wanna ask if we can stretch our legs and walk to the pier?"

"Sure lets go ask him," I said. Lilli and I got out of the truck and walked over to where my uncle Gary was crouched over working on a tire. Gary said we could go to the pier as long as we were safe by the water. Lilli and I walked down onto the pier and sat down on the edge. Lilli was staring into the water and humming one of my favorite songs. I looked back and saw Gary digging in his truck trying to find something when Lilli got up.

"I think I need to go use the bathroom," she said

"Alright," I said. I looked down and wiggled my toes in the cold water. I was thinking about all the stuff we were going to do and all of the sudden Lilli came running back onto the dock and pushed me into the water!

"Lilli!" I yelled "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know, I guess it was a perfect opportunity!" Lilli laughed "So how's the water?" She giggled.

"Why don't you find out for yourself!" I laughed and grabbed Lilli's foot and pulled her into the water. We laughed, even though we were soaked, the water felt good and it was fun to get out of the car and mess around.

"Girls, are you ok?" Gary yelled while running over to us.

"Ya we're fine," we laughed. "We fell in and were just gonna swim for a little while!"

"In your clothes?" He asked

"Ya it's ok we'll change before we head back on the road."

"Well we won't be able to leave for a little while, a tow truck is coming to pick up the truck because one of the tires popped and they won't be done with it until tomorrow. They are giving us a rental car for now. We will have to find something fun to do here in town and find a place to sleep tonight," Gary said, sounding the most disappointed I've ever heard.

"It's ok, we will figure something out," Lilli said.

"Ya, we can still make it to Pennsylvania tomorrow!" I said.

"Thanks for understanding girls," he said.

Lilli and I got out of the water and got our bags out of the car. We went to the bathroom with a dry pair of clothes and changed. Gary asked us what we wanted to do tonight.

"A movie or go out to eat, any of that sound fun?" he asked.

"Honestly I'd be ok with just going out to eat!" Lilli said. So we went to a sushi restaurant.

"I've never had sushi but sure it sounds like fun!" I said. Finally, the tow truck got there so we got into the truck and he drove off.

"Well this will be your rental car until we finish working on your truck, we will give you a call when it's done," said the mechanic. We thanked him and got all our stuff out of the truck and shoved it into the rental car.

"Alright off we go to Tokyo Sushi and Hibachi," Gary said.

"Yay," I exclaimed! Once we got there we got out of the car and walked inside "It's so cool in here!" I said.

"I know right," Lilli said. I took a seat by her in a booth and across from Gary.

"Hello welcome to Tokyo! My name is Ty, what can I start you all with?" Lilli and I got water and Gary got coke and we all ordered the sushi.

"Sounds good I'll be back," Ty said. He kind of had a bit of an accent but not very strong.

"So girls what else would you like to do tonight?" Gary asked.

"We could go find a hotel and get to sleep early so we could be back on the road early tomorrow morning, do you want to do that?"

"Anything is fine with me," Lilli said.

"Yeah me too," I said.

"Alright we will go and look for a hotel after dinner," Gary said.

"Ok sounds good!" I said. It was about 25 more minutes until we got our food.

"Mmm, it kinda tastes like fish and ramen noodles," Lilli laughed.

"Do you like it though?" Gary asked.

"Yes, I love it!" Lilli said.

I didn't like it at all, it tasted like dirt, but I didn't want to be mean so I just said it wasn't my thing. We finished eating and walked back out to the car. It was dark outside but not pitch black.

"Yeah um, do you have any rooms available?" Gary asked. He was on the phone with a hotel manager.

"Ok that sounds great! Thanks!" He said as he hung up the phone.

"Well, do they have any rooms?" I asked.

"Yes! I booked us a suite because that's all they had left but I figured that you girls wouldn't mind," Gary said. Lilli and I looked at each other.

"You mean like a suite that has separate bedrooms and is super nice and fancy?" Lilli asked.

"Yes," Gary said with a chuckle.

"That's so cool!" I said. We got there and the room was huge! The biggest hotel room I had ever seen. Even Gary said that this room was nicer than some of the ones at his hotel. I looked at the alarm clock in our room and it was 9:48 p.m. Lilli and I turned off the light and pulled up the sheets. Then all of the sudden, we heard a loud crack of thunder.

"Woah, that was loud!" I said.

"Yeah, I wonder if it's gonna storm all night," Lilli added.

"I sure hope not!" I said. We tried to go back to sleep but a few minutes later BOOM!

Thunder roared louder than the first time.

"Ugh it's so loud!" Lilli said while sitting up. "I know, let's just watch some TV until the storm dies down," Lilli said while picking up the remote. A little while later I looked at the clock again and it was 3:42 a.m.!

"Come on, no more tv, we have to get some sleep," I said "Wait, tomorrow all we're gonna do is sit in a truck all day, so why don't we just stay up tonight and we can sleep in the truck tomorrow? It's already 4 anyways!"

We thought it was a good idea, so Lilli and I watched TV all night and played games and talked. It was about 6:30 when Gary got up. Lilli and I told him that we just woke up and he believed us.

"Alright girls pack up!" Gary said. "Let's go down to the shop and see if the truck is ready." Lilli and I got up and went to the rental car.

"Hey Gary, how long till Pennsylvania from here?" Lilli asked.

"Well I think it's about 18 more hours," Gary replied.

"We could still make it there tonight and still have two days to stay there!" I said.

"Ya that's right!" Lilli said in a cheerful voice. We drove to the car shop and once we got there we saw our truck parked right in the garage of the shop.

"Hey guys your truck is right over there and here are the keys," he said while handing us the keys to the truck.

"Thanks Buddy!" I said.

"Anytime! Have fun on your road trip!" He replied.

We got back in the truck and headed on the road. It had been about three hours so we stopped at McDonald's to get some lunch.

"Mm soooo good," Lilli said.

"I know I was so hungry," I said while picking up my pop.

"I'm tired," Lilli said.

"Me too." I yawned. Lilli and I laid down in the back seats and fell asleep. A little while later I woke up to Lilli shaking me. "Woah wha-what's wrong?" I asked.

"Um well the good news is we're only about eight hours away but the bad news is," Gary took a long pause "We're lost."

"Wait, what do you mean?" I asked.

"I took the wrong exit and there wasn't a place for a U-turn so I had to keep going straight and now the GPS

is having trouble connecting," Gary said sadly.

Lilli and I told Gary it was okay and he shouldn't worry. About 10 minutes later Lilli and I were braiding each other's hair while Gary was looking for a place to stay tonight in Ohio.

"How do you feel about camping tonight?" Gary asked.

"That would be so fun!" We both said. There was a campsite 10 minutes away.

"You girls can get settled and I'll start a fire," Gary said. Lilli and I went on a walk while Gary got set up.

"Do you even think we're going to make it to Pennsylvania?" Lilli asked.

"I hope so," I said. "Otherwise we wasted our whole spring break in the car." Lilli and I kept walking and took some pictures of the sun. We headed back because it was getting late and by the time we got back it was 8 o'clock.

"You girls hungry?" Gary asked. We were both starving. There were hot dogs and marshmallows in the tent so we started roasting.

"Mmm these hotdogs are so good!" I said. "I love them!"

It was already dark by the time we ate our s'mores so we went to the tent and laid down. Lilli and I were so tired, Gary looked tired too. He said he would wake us at 6 a.m. so we could get on the road and still make it to Pennsylvania, if even for a short time tomorrow. I think I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

"Girls, girls," I heard Gary say as he shook us awake. "It's 10:30! We all overslept!" "Oh no," Lilli groaned.

"Well girls I have some bad news. We are still three hours away so by the time we pack up and get there it would be after 2 p.m. and that wouldn't give us much time to stay there so what would you like to do? Keep going and only get an hour to stay or start heading back home now and get home sooner?" Gary asked. Lilli looked I at each other sadly.

"I just really wish we would've made it to Pennsylvania," Lilli said sadly. Gary apologized to us because he knew how excited we were.

"It's ok Gary, it's not your fault" I said.

We started heading home which was going to be about 17 more hours until we actually got home but 17 was better than 20. I pulled out the bucket list.

"We never got to do anything on the spring break bucket list," I said.

"I guess we'll just have to do it next year," Lilli said with a sigh.

I looked at everything there was to do on the bucket list. "Lilli look!" I said. "The first thing on the list was to go swimming."

"Ok, what about it?" Lilli asked.

"Well remember when the tire popped and we fell in the lake? That technically was swimming!" I said.

"Oh yeah, and the next thing is to try a new food! We ate hibachi and sushi, remember!" Lilli said excitedly.

"Of course I do," I said.

"And what about when we stayed up all night because of that storm," I said.

"Yes! That was an all nighter, it's on the list!" Lilli laughed.

"We watched a movie in the back seats and did each other's hair, and we even went on that long walk and took great pictures yesterday!" I said.

"We also stayed in a tent and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows, and that's camping so we can cross that off our list too!" I said excitedly.

"Wow, maybe this spring break wasn't so bad after all," Lilli said.

"We might not have made it all the way to Pennsylvania, but honestly, I wouldn't have changed a thing," I said.

"Me either!" laughed Lilli.

The Bell Tower

By Andie Sanderson, Grade 7

Dakota Meadows Middle School, Mankato

I let out a big exhausted sigh as I got out of the comfortable bed in the castle room I was staying in. I had to get up to do my duty, which was standing at the top of a tall brick frame that almost was as tall as the castle. Even though I never ring the bell, because danger never comes, I still love my job. I love that the wind blows and billows my dress and makes my hair flow through the current. I have a better job than most other servants to the king and queen. Some have to stay inside like the cooks and the people who monitor the dungeon. I would never want to do that, I said in my mind. I felt the cool breeze gust around me, I was almost at the top of the tower. It is very close to home too! As soon as I learned that information, I was excited. I did not have to walk very a far distance to my job. Here I was, at the top of the tower. It was a good thing I decided to wear my warmer dress today I thought, shivering.

It was almost springtime and from the top of the tower I could see beyond the town walls. We had town walls built when I was a baby, to keep people from other towns out. I frowned, that was way back then when the other towns hated us. We are good friends now but the king never commanded the walls to be torn down. The wind playfully teased my hazel hair, whipping it around my green eyes and my many freckles. I laughed quietly to myself, another day of just me and the wind. Thankfully, no danger and no bell to ring today.

I walked back to my room silently pondering the day to myself, what I do every day after the night-watcher comes to take my place. Once I stepped into the spacious room I felt another wave of exhaustion hit me. I decided to go to bed in the cozy dress I was wearing. I didn't bother to take off my shoes, and I fell into the fluffy bed. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep.

"Bella, Bella. Can you wake up please?" I slit my eyes open, looking at the figure that sat on my bed. Who was she?

"Who are you?" I asked the shadowy figure.

"I am the queen," the royalty said, urging me to get up. "Now Beth, my daughter, has fallen sick. I was wondering if you could stay with her to help her feel better. Please?" The queen was begging for my help. "You are so responsible for your job, I couldn't help but notice."

"Alright," I finally said, "I will, but what if there is an attack? Who will ring the bell and alert the town of danger?" I did not want the kingdom to fall if danger did come. Yet, I did not want to disobey the queen's orders.

"Oh, dear me. You don't have to worry about that," the queen stated. "It has been over ten years since the last attack!" The queen was more concerned about her daughter than the city being attacked.

"Will the king know I am not at the tower today?" I questioned.

"Of course not," the queen remarked. "I did not want to intrude on his sleep!" The queen yanked me out of bed and we were walking down the hallway in no time at all.

In a short while, we were standing outside Beth's room. The queen opened the door suddenly and we were in the large room. Beth was laying in her bed, looking very pale. I quietly started over to a chair next to the princess's bed. She stirred and I sat down on the chair, I looked out the window and it was still very dark out. I felt bad for the night-watcher, who was waiting for me. He would go home when I didn't show up and there would be no protection for the kingdom during the day. I sighed heavily, hoping I wouldn't fall asleep in the chair. Beth quickly opened her eyes and asked me if the queen was gone.

"Yes she is gone," I replied honestly. "Why?"

"It's just, she's always fussing over my hair, clothes, shoes and my boyish play," Beth sighed.

"Ah, why do you not like that?" I said, truly inquiring.

"Well, if you promise you won't tell," Beth said hesitantly. "It's because she wants me to be super prim and proper, and I want to ride bareback horses, get muddy, drink tea out of normal cups and run in the meadow, scraping my knees and getting grass stains. I want to be free," Beth expressed emotionally and sincerely.

"Well, you should get some rest, you can do that after you get better," I said, not wanting the queen to find her daughter covered in grass stains and scraped knees, I chuckled lightly at the thought.

All of a sudden a guard rushed in, he was tall and clearly out of breath, he started to talk but then he put his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

"Madame," the guard started, "there is an attack on the city, the queen told me to tell you to stay here."

"Who knows about this?" I asked.

"Almost no one!" the guard said. "Stay put and we will handle this!"

I couldn't just let the village people die because of my mistake. The queen told me to stay put, but if I did not warn the people and the gate closer, the city would suffer from this huge mistake. I felt horrible, I couldn't choose! I decided, at last, to go ring the bell for the sake of my people, not just for the queen.

I darted out the door after the guard, I ran as hard as could! I finally was at the doorway to the bell tower, I opened the door and dashed up the stairs. At the top I could see the gate-closer lounging. I also saw the enemy riding on swift horses, they were almost to the open gate! I saw the rope and pulled it with all my might, letting loose a loud gonging sound heard throughout the village. The gate-closer instantly started to close the big, wooden village doors. Would he close the doors in time?

Suddenly, the castle doors opened and our large army rushed out onto the castle wall walkway. There was very little fighting and we won! I retreated back into Beth's room. She was sleeping.

As our troops were called back to the castle to re-group, I was waiting patiently with Beth. Just as I predicted, a guard came into Beth's room and told me to follow him to the throne room.

In the throne room, the queen was steaming with anger. I was frightened at first but I said to myself I had done the right thing, protecting the village people.

"Tell me Bella Marie Aldane, why did you decide to leave Beth and go ring the bell?" the queen fumed.

"I decided to do what I did because the townspeople need to be kept safe and if I had not rung the bell, what would the kingdom be doing now your majesty," I replied truthfully.

"Now THAT is the rudest thing anyone has ever said to me!" the queen seethed, enraged. "I hereby banish Bella Marie Aldane to the dungeons!" the queen spat.

I was shocked, I thought she would be angry but not this angry! The tears welled up my eyes and I let them fall at their will, down my face. I am being banished to the dungeon. I have heard many stories, now it is time to see if they're true, I thought. My heart was racing because of the spooky tales in the back of my mind. The guards took me by the arms and we began the walk to the dungeon.

The guards stopped at a slightly molded door, they opened it with a key and we plodded down the slick steps. I was led to a dark cell near the front of the dungeon, the guards pushed me inside and locked it. I took a look at my dark surroundings. The walls are not as moldy as I thought, the floor not as moist as in some stories, the iron bars glistening but not dripping with slime. I didn't want to stay here forever, but I had to pay for doing the right thing? That didn't make any sense to me. I had a responsibility to the kingdom and I got punished for doing it. I don't understand, why is the queen mad at me for doing my job? I had so many questions but I was all alone in the cell. I decided at last that I should get some sleep, maybe in the morning things will be better

Creeeaakk! I was startled awake as a pair of guards approached my cell.

"Get up, the king wants to see you," a gruff voice said. I carefully stood up, not wanting to appear as a threat. They grabbed my arms and we briskly walked up the slippery steps and closed the moldy door behind us. We hustled back to the throne room. I was nervous, I didn't know what the king would say. I stood in front of the royal chair, trembling in the sight of the king.

"I heard my wife's perspective but I called you here to listen to yours. You may begin," the king said eyeing the queen who sat in the corner frowning.

"Well, I decided to protect the city instead of staying with Beth because I wanted to do my job. Then the queen sent me to the dungeons because I was simply doing my job. That part didn't make sense to me," I replied, my voice wavering at first but gaining confidence.

"Well it seems to me that you were sent to the dungeons for no reason," the king spoke. "I say you can be let out of the dungeons and continue doing your job," the king pronounced. I was so happy, I just had to tell him my view and he let me keep my job and get out of the dungeon.

The fresh air inflated my lungs as I breathed in the spring scent from the top of the lookout tower. The kingdom that attacked us were our friends now, Beth dared to talk to her mom and I kept my job. Nobody attacked our village since the time I had to choose between a responsibility and a right to my people and a responsibility to my queen. I had such a happy life.

Emily's Essay Experience

By Peyton Seeger, Grade 4

Lakeview Elementary School, Albert Lea

"Time to wake up now Emily," yelled her mom from the bathroom right next to Emily's dreamland where it seemed like anything was possible.

"Coming Mom," Emily yelled as she rolled out of bed like an angry ogre when someone was stomping on their bridge. "I will go let the dog out and then feed it for you."

"OK, but make sure you don't leave the dog's food laying around bec—" Mom tried to finish her sentence but Emily interrupted to finish it for her.

"Because our other dog got into the dog food and started to rip the bag up, she ate all the food. Then she got so sick that she turned into a big fat marshmallow," Emily finished her mom's sentence.

Once Emily finished feeding her dog, she still wasn't ready to go to school yet and she still had more chores to finish. When Emily finally finished her chores and made her lunch she could get dressed.

"Mom," Emily yelled. "Can you grab my athletic clothes from the basement? Today we have the Pacer and I want to be comfortable while I am running," she said like she didn't have much more time to live. "Oh, and my athletic clothes are in my soccer bin and make sure to smell them first, because I forgot to wash most of it after the season was over."

"OK, but next time you have to go get them yourself, got that Emily?" she said in a very elegant voice which made Emily think that her mom was turning into a princess.

When Emily got to class that day her teacher, Mrs. Withers, had a special announcement to make. Emily had heard about it when the teacher wasn't even there yet. She was wondering how everybody knew about it but then she remembered where it came from. Her teacher had told everyone that there was a big writing contest coming up and that it was about the rights and responsibilities. Emily realized the reason she didn't remember it was because she went home with a temp of 102 degrees that day. She was really tired so she didn't remember.

"Now you all remember that I told you that the big writing contest was coming up, right?" Ms. Withers said, hoping that the class would remember.

"Yes!" the class said with cheer.

"The assignment isn't due until March so you don't have to stress about getting it done because we have two more months so you have enough time," she told all the class with so much excitement that the whole class looked like a megaphone had just been blown in their ears.

"Oh, and remember it is about rights and responsibilities," Mrs. Withers said.

When Emily got home she ran up to her room so fast that she almost knocked a flower pot over but she ran back before it could hit the ground. She started by writing down ideas in her big blue binder with a big blue notebook with the most elegant paper of all. She started to think that she could do a skit but then it could end up being too short of a story so then she thought that she could talk about how animals have rights and responsibilities. But animals don't have human rights and responsibilities so what could she do?

Then she realized that she could do a story about future responsibilities and how she thought that everyone should have the right to go to school. First, she started by typing down the date and then she started.

"One responsibility I will have when I am older is that I am going to have to take out the garbage and the recycling. One of the best jobs I will have when I am older is that I will get to have my own kids and take care of them on my own. When I am out of college, every morning I will have to get up and go to work so I can earn money to pay for a house, food and all those other bills. A right that I think that everybody should have is to be able to go to school. If most of the people in the world just stopped going to school then we wouldn't have all these great things in our life," she wrote hoping that her writing made sense.

When Emily was done writing this all down on a piece of paper, she quickly dashed downstairs and put it in her backpack. Then she put all the dishes away and she took a shower. Finally, she went to bed.

The next day when she got home from school she quickly ran with her writing into the bathroom and locked the door. Emily thought that it might be a cozy spot to work on her writing alone. When she grabbed it out of her backpack she

continued her writing that she had been working on for only a day now. It seemed longer, but she had only started thinking of an idea two days ago.

The next day when Emily got to school, she knew something was up. Her class had assigned seats and this had never been a part of her routine. Emily wanted to know why things were like this, so she decided to find out.

"Hey, Mrs. Withers," Emily said. "How come it is such a big deal that we can only talk about school and not anything else?" Emily asked, waiting for an answer from Mrs. Withers.

"Because we have a lot to learn right now," she said like there was no time to waste.

"I want you all to come up to my desk one at a time when I call your names," she said in a very stern voice that Emily had never heard her talk in before.

When Emily got called up to go to Mrs. Withers desk she was nervous because she had never had a teacher make her scared and a little annoyed at the same time before. She looked down at a piece of paper that said, "Your Chore Around the Classroom is..." There were so many choices to choose from and since she was the first one to pick a job that she wanted she chose 'Teacher's Little Helper'.

"Good choice," Mrs. Withers said. "Next person is Alex," she said, sounding a little happier than she did before.

When Emily got home she had a note on the counter that said the things that everyone had to do and that she had to start doing on her own without anyone helping her. The first thing on the list was go to bed on time every night except for weekends.

She thought that one could be done easily, but there was one responsibility that was not so exciting in her mind. It was to have to take out the garbage. Emily guessed her mom had talked to other adults about the rights and responsibilities that their kids have and then her mom must have thought that Emily should take out the garbage too. She was not going to let her mom make her take out the trash and get all smelly for nothing, and this was her mom's job before so why does she have to give Emily the job if she already does it all of the time?

When Emily was done letting the dogs out and feeding them, she decided that she was going to surprise her mom when she got home. She was going to do all the responsibilities that her mom had given her and then when her mom got back and she asked her to do all the things she put on that list then she could say no. Then when her mom asked why she didn't do them Emily would say, "Because I already did them all." Then the trick will be on her mom.

When Emily's mom got back home, they went through that whole conversation and they both had a big laugh. Once that was over with Emily finally got back to working on her story, but then she realized that she could just write about her whole day. Emily's whole day was about rights and responsibilities.

When Emily got back into her room, she found the piece of paper that had her writing on it and continued her story.

"OK," she said. "I think that everybody should go to school and make sure that they learn what they need to learn so they can succeed in life with the job that they want. I also have been working on responsibilities that I have if you want me to share about that for a while."

The next day at school Emily's teacher said, "This is exciting!" sounding surprised about how much writing Emily had been doing.

"Some of the responsibilities that I have at home are to help watch my little brother for a while if my mom needs to go get groceries at the store. Another thing that I will have to do is that I have to make sure that I pay my bills and that I will pay them on time so I don't get a bunch of notices and warnings."

"Thank you, Emily." Mrs. Withers was excited that Emily had gotten this far in her writing.

Emily was one of the only kids in the class doing the writing contest so she thought that she might have an advantage. The contest was only two weeks away and Emily had three fourths of her writing done so she was not under a lot of pressure.

When Emily got home, she just about finished her story. Emily only needed one more day to work on it. She still had two weeks left until she had to turn her writing in. So that meant that Emily could read through it a few times to find any mistakes and then fix them right away.

After a few days she finally has finished fixing all her typos and her spelling mistakes. She finally could print it off and send it in to the contest to see if she would be chosen and published into the book.

A few days after Emily sent it in she got a letter back in the mail saying that she exceeded the expectations and that she should be attending the contest reception.

"Hey Mom!" Emily cried. "Guess what happened at school today?"

"What happened?" she asked, sounding really surprised.

"I got into the writing contest!" she said, sounding like it was the most exciting thing in her life.

"Awesome. When is the reception?" Her mom asked, sounding so excited.

"I think that it is in a week, so I have time to get ready to go," Emily said. "Are you going to come watch me?" Emily asked, hoping her mom would say yes.

"Of course," her mom said.

When the day of the writing contest reception arrived Emily and her mom got dressed in their best clothes and then she went to feed the dog. When Emily and her mom were done doing all their responsibilities they got into the car and drove to the writing contest reception.

It took them about an hour to get to the reception but when they made it Emily was so excited. When they got into the building where the reception was going to begin they saw a bunch of photos on the walls of other kids' writings.

When Emily and her mom got there they took a seat at the table with Emily's name on it. Emily and her mom were so excited they couldn't wait until the ceremony began.

"Hello, and welcome to the writing contest of 2019–20," the speaker said with a bunch of joy and excitement.

"Today we will be announcing the writers that got their stories into this book right here in front of me."

"The first person that I am going to call up to the stage is Emily who wrote about her chores and about how everybody should be able to go to school."

"That is me!" Emily said SO excited as she ran up to the stage.

"Here is your certificate that shows that you wrote this story and that we enjoyed it."

"Thank you, I am so happy that you enjoyed my story," Emily said surprised.

A Garden of Learning

By Nityan Sharma, Kindergarten

Bridges Community School, Mankato

School was over. I was waiting for summer to begin to start my kitchen garden. Mom was going to give me the seeds. I was going to plant tomatoes, cucumber, peppers, zucchini and pumpkins! My mom gave me the seeds and helped me plant them in the little patch in my garden.

"You've got to take care of these, now," she said. I sighed.

"I know," I said for the millionth time. Well, every kid has a right to plant a garden if they want to during summer. "I can do it, but I just don't understand what's the big deal about." I watered my plants the next day and a few days after that and they grew. I know they were just tiny seedlings poking out of the dirt, but this was my very first garden! Then it rained and my grandma told me not to water for a couple days, so I didn't and then my cousin came over and I forgot to water the plants or clear the weeds. I was too busy doing other fun things.

Then my grandma came over to visit and asked me to show her the plants. I went to show her excitedly, but they looked so sad! The tomato plants were dry, the zucchini was almost gone too. I felt very sad. I cried. My grandma felt sad too.

She helped me remove the dead branches and the weeds. Then we removed the dead plant and replanted a new seedling. I buried the dead plant and promised I wouldn't let that happen to my other plants.

"You have to be responsible about taking care of your plants, dear. You have a right to plant a garden, but when you do, you also have the responsibility to take care of it. Rights and responsibilities go together."

I felt like a grown up and maybe understood a little better about what it meant by being responsible. From then on I checked my garden every day, removed the weeds, aerated and watered as required.

Now I was worried because we were going on a vacation. Who was going to look after my plants? I discussed my problem with my mom. She smiled and said, "I am proud of you. Don't worry, I have spoken to one of my friends and she has volunteered to look after the plants in our absence. We are going for a short time anyways. But I appreciate that

you are concerned about them.”

During my vacation I thought about my plants often and well prayed for them too.

When we returned, I ran straight to my garden and yes there were two tomatoes and one cucumber.

I watched them grow day after day and called my grandma every day to find out if something else was required to be done. She told me and then helped me put a little fence around my garden to protect my plants from the little animals like squirrels and birds.

It was all worth the effort when I put tomatoes and cucumbers and a zucchini on the kitchen table. Wow! How happy I was and how I beamed. The cucumbers tasted better than any cucumbers I had tasted before. My parents and my grandparents thought the same thing.

The frosting on the cake was the enormous pumpkin. Actually, not so enormous, but it was fairly big, for me at least! I put that pumpkin on our front step during fall. We harvested three pumpkins from our garden and I loved it! None of this would have been possible if I had not become responsible about my garden.

Next year, I am going to try growing a watermelon plant too. A resolution I would like to make, is to always be responsible, because I have understood that, with rights, come duties and responsibilities.

A Perpetual Tussle

By Rohan Sharma, Grade 5

Bridges Community School, Mankato

Rights and duties, sounded more entertaining than duties and rights – Toba Beta. I was thrilled to read this quotation! I rushed to mom’s room and showed it her proudly. At last someone agreed with me. I hoped to get out of performing daily chores of cleaning my room, my play area, my books from under my bed or bathroom, doing my own laundry, keeping the garbage out every Thursday, helping Dad with lawn mowing, grocery shopping and meal planning... The list is endless and I was rattling it at supersonic speed. Well, Mom was too smart. She quoted Mahatma Gandhi, to Raman, the procrastinator (my nickname): *Begin with duties of a man and rights will follow as spring follows winter.*

Well folks, who can argue with the logic of the most renowned non-violent leader, the ideal of Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King? I changed tactics and quoted from the charter of Rights of Children:

I have a right to have everything I need for a better life. I have right to play and enjoy whenever I have the opportunity. In fact every child has the right to live peacefully. Every child has the right to grow peacefully and getting what they want for the good of their lives, every child has the right to be protected from abuse of adults.

She looked at me with pursed lips and many frowns on her forehead. I stopped in my track, although I wanted to read to her all the 12 rights. I have become a great face reader. Looking at the number of frowns on her forehead, they were five. I was about to cross the line but checked myself in time. It is springtime. I had thrown a seed in her fertile brain to let it germinate; the idea will bear fruit! Patience is a virtue folks.

Well, Mom never believed in this virtue! She rattled out 22 responsibilities of children towards household work and asked me to show how many I was doing! No doubt her mind is too full of ideas to plant a fresh crop. My younger siblings were watching all this but not participating. They know from experience not to take any side as they either will get the rights or approval of parents by not participating in this battle.

Well, the brave warrior marched on looking for fresh salvo. I changed tactics again-ah! PETULANCE! But she countered it with amiability and charitable spirit by offering to make my favorite apple pie. I saw the fickle public lapping the offer while I was planning my next chess move.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” I screamed.

Alas! I was thwarted, as in walked the King to Support his Queen! And like 'The Castle' my mind was looking for the escape. But wait, I can always play the victim card!

"Nobody cares for me," I bawled. My younger sister was now really amused because that was her general move whenever she lost the tussle. The King asked me what the matter was.

"It is summer vacation and we are not going out, and mom is using child labor to get all her work done by us," I blurted out. I saw her raised eyebrows and decided to retreat,

"We had agreed to forego the holiday in order to buy a car big enough for all of you, that was the decision we all had taken," Dad said. Now, I was in a thick soup. The idea had been proposed by me. Better walk out in a huff, I stomped out of the room.

I was still sleeping when the three musketeers jumped onto my bed and blabbered excitedly, "Wake up sleepy head we are going to Camp Forest on Saturday. Dad wants to discuss the routine with us." They came like a thunder and disappeared like the lightening. I was dumbstruck and walked quietly to the living room. Everybody was happy and excited. I looked at them confused. Mom not angry, dad not disappointed, folks what was happening?!

"Mom, dad, I am sorry for yesterday," I apologized. "I forgot about the decision." Mom smiled at me.

"Don't worry," she said. "This trip has been sponsored by your grandparents. Grand dad is celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday at Camp Forest. But there is a catch, no cellphones, no computer games, no iPad and no television. Good old hiking, rock climbing, canoeing, swimming, bonfire and living in the tents."

I jumped with joy and started singing, "Happy Birthday..." and on a cue my siblings joined me in the wild forest dance. The dampener was thrown at us, "There are four more families, with grandparents, so you have to be on your best behavior," said dad. Well, who cares!

The next four days went like the whirlwind; everyone was given some task to perform. Things were being collected according to the list provided by the camp organizers. The nearest town was some eighty miles from the campsite so the packing was extensive. I was made responsible for the jungle boots, soccer shoes, story books, swimsuits and recreational material.

I started with all the enthusiasm, packed almost everything. While cleaning my room I found the three missing books of Tintin series. I jumped with joy. Everybody was loading the boxes assigned to them in the car. I decided to take the books with me to the camp. But the temptation was too much for me, so I started browsing through them. Soon I was lost in the book and was being picked up by the enemy to be thrown into the deep ravine. I heard him shout.

"Raman, when are you going to show some responsibility, you are yet not ready. Be quick." My confused brain was thinking why the enemy looked and sounded like dad! My fuddled brain cleared up and I rushed to the toilet got ready in a jiffy and was the first one to sit in the car, of course with my unfinished Tintin book.

After, three hours we stopped for Lunch at McDonald's. After lunch, Mom decided to relax for some time in the nearby park. We ran to our favorite joyrides. And lo, Simran fell down and cut herself! Dad went back to the car to get the first aid box. I saw him talking on his mobile phone very seriously. I thought it must be from his hospital. He came back with a very serious face. Mom joked, "Hey, it is nothing serious. Why do you always get so worried?" We reached the camp after another three hours uneventful ride. I wondered why Dad was so quiet.

It was a very busy evening. We had to pitch our own tents. It was a real fun. Dad had regained his usual self and made everything a real cakewalk. I organized my army and assigned them the boxes to be brought to our tents. The General marched proudly and handed over the boxes to the soldiers. They stood out in a line waiting for the General to lead them on. The General turned to pick up his box and almost fainted, stood rooted to the spot with the world spinning around him. NO BOX!!! The moment my army realized that I had forgotten to load my box there was a rebellion. They ran shouting for the King and the Queen.

I, the disgraced General, waited for the sword to fall on my head! I could picture Mom nagging me about rights and responsibilities, Dad lecturing me against procrastination and my siblings constantly ribbing me for my dereliction of duty. I couldn't move.

Through the haze I saw Dad approaching and braced myself for a tongue lashing. He stood for some time looking at me and raised his hand. I cringed with dread; I had never been hit before. He put his hand on my shoulder and quietly steered me towards my tent.

Nobody said anything! But the bonfire was like the hellfire and the sumptuous dinner tasted leathery. At night I

crawled into my tent with my wounded self-respect.

We woke to the chirping of the birds. I felt great! It was Grandpa's birthday! But the reality of my negligence hit me like the tsunami. The dew drenched environment seemed to have shed tears at my irresponsibility. Enthusiastic greetings sounded everywhere. I went for a walk in the woods as I didn't want to see the disappointed faces of my siblings when everyone would go to the lagoon for swimming. That would be the time when everyone would know about my goof up.

After a reasonable time, I walked back to the campsite and heard the sound of "Happy Birthday." My Grandparents had arrived. I walked with a heavy heart and greeted Grandpa. He took a long look at me.

"What's wrong my chess buddy?" he asked. My brother, with a sullen face, told Grandpa. Grandpa crinkled his eyes and said, "That happens sometimes kids. It is my birthday lets have fun! I got the biggest chocolate cake for you! Raman go, get the cake."

I opened the boot of the car and stood transfixed. The cake was kept on the box I had forgotten at home. How did Grandpa know? Then I realized with whom dad was talking outside the park. Grandpa had to drive an extra 100 miles to pick up the box from home. I felt choked and my eyes welled up. I don't know whether I was happy, embarrassed, guilty, grateful, overwhelmed or combination of all that.

I composed myself and walked back with the box and kept it on the ground. Oh! What a war dance around the box! I moved towards Dad.

"Sorry and thank you Dad," I said with a teary voice.

"It happens, we live and learn," he smiled kindly.

No amount of scolding, nagging or punishment would have ever brought to me the lesson I learned on that day. Before asking for my rights I must be aware of my responsibilities and the consequences of my actions on others. I was really thankful to my parents and grandparents for showing me compassion, understanding and empathy. I now truly understood the meaning of the quotation by John C Maxwell my Mom often cited: *The greatest day in your life and mine is when we take total responsibility for our attitudes. That's the day we truly grow up.*

Homework and School

By Nora Ann Smith, Grade 4

Lakeview Elementary School, Albert Lea

As I enter the kitchen the wonderful aroma of toast fills the air. I get the can of peanut butter and the jar of strawberry jelly. My mother's voice snaps me out of my toast dreamland.

"Emily," Her voice is stern. "Did you remember to do your homework?"

"Yes Mom," I sassily reply. I open the can of peanut butter and grab bread and a butter knife. Then I open the jar of strawberry jelly. She raises her eyebrows as far as they can go.

"All of it?" She asks me sternly. I've never heard her voice this stern.

"Yes, all of it and I put it in my bookbag," I mumble grumpily. We go through this every morning. Ever since my teacher Mrs. Wenninger called home to tell my parents that she didn't have any homework from me. She's done that five times now. Mom tells her I turn in my homework. But the truth is sometimes maybe I forget. Okay all the time. It's not like I try to forget. It's just that I do. I can hear my younger brother Albert and my dad upstairs. Albert is in kindergarten and I am in fourth grade.

"Dad!" Albert yells impatiently. "We need to go!"

"Okay! I'm coming!" my dad yells back. Albert runs into the kitchen. My dad is right behind him out of breath.

"Albert, Emily. Grab your things and go get in the car," my dad says as he gulps some air trying to catch his breath. I get up, grab my things and walk outside. The cool autumn breeze flows all around me. In California this is basically fall and winter.

My brother opens the door and comes to stand next to me. He must see me staring off into the distance because he

asks, "What are we looking at?"

"Oh nothing," I say startled by him suddenly being next to me and by him talking to me. He never talks to me. For some reason I think he's scared of me. We get into the car and I double check to make sure I have my homework. A thought pops into my head and I say it.

"Dad, do you think everyone in the world should have the right to go to school?" I ask.

"Well I guess I've never thought about it before. But I would probably say no," he replies and I can tell he's thought about it before. I am shocked by his answer.

"Why?" I ask. His answer is simple.

"Well, some people can't afford it, and others wouldn't work hard enough."

"Well, some people do work hard enough. And if they can't afford it, um, we will set up a program!" I announce triumphantly.

"What if some people can't afford to be in the program?" he laughs as he asks me that. He thinks he's so funny. Well, I'll show him who is laughing.

"You won't have to pay for it! You just fill out a sheet and you're in!" I shout angrily.

"I know squirt," is what he replies. Then he looks in the mirror and says, "I'm sorry."

"Fine, I forgive you." I don't hold grudges against people. Well at least not for a really long time.

"Okay we're at the school. Everyone out!" My dad sounds like a drill sergeant. Albert looks frightened, he hates it when anyone is mad. Especially when they are mad at him. I try to say something that will comfort him.

"Albert, me and Dad are just having a little argument, you go inside now. Mr. Smith, your kindergarten teacher is waiting for you." Albert looks fine now and starts skipping inside.

"Emily you can go inside too. We will continue this after school," my dad says grumpily because he doesn't like it that Albert was scared. As I walk inside I hear him sigh. He must be thinking because he always sighs when he thinks. And when I say always, I mean always.

I walk to my locker and get my things out of it. The bell rings as soon as I step foot inside the classroom. I sit down and reach into my folder. Wait a minute. This isn't my homework folder. Oh no! I forgot it in my bookbag. I just stick the folder in my desk when I realize it's the wrong one. I can hear my teacher's heels click on the floor as she walks over to my desk.

"Emily, where is your homework?" she asks like she means business and is not fooling around.

"Um. Sir, I mean Miss. Wenninger. I forgot it at home," I say that shyly even though that's not really what happened.

"Is that so? Well, I will have to call your parents then." Her voice is stern. "Emily, if this keeps up I will have to have a meeting with your parents. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am. I understand," I reply shyly. Everyone in the class is staring at me now. I can see Ally out of the corner of my eye. She is making a pouty face and looking at me. I roll my eyes. She is so rude.

"Good," my teacher says. Then she turns and walks back to her desk. Teachers are always asking me if I understand. Like they think I'm dumb or something. They also never touch me. Like they don't put their hand on my back and be super supportive when I am having a hard time. They act like if they touch me they will suddenly be dumb and won't remember anything. Like me. Well not the dumb part, but the won't remember anything part. I remember some things but not really important things.

So I just had to have that talk with my teacher for about the hundredth time. I'm glad it's over but now she's going to call my parents. Ugh. Why can't I just remember things like I should? The call will not be good. Plus now I have to be good for the rest of the day so the phone call is just about my homework. If I am good for the rest of the day I can walk over to my dad's classroom and go home with him and my brother. When I get home I will for sure do my homework right away because then I don't have to worry about it later. I still have six and a half hours left of school. So for now I am stuck doing decimals and fractions. Also today we have to take a reading test. We were told this morning that the test is on the book we read in class and that there are twenty questions. Yay, we are starting with my favorite subject, math.

"So class, today we will be learning about percentages. Now does anyone know what one and eleven hundredths as a percentage is?" she asks.

Michael raises his hand and answers, "One hundred and eleven percent ma'am."

"That is correct Michael," she looks pleased that he didn't make a huge joke about it like he always does. Also that he got it right.

I raise my hand and Mrs. Wenninger calls on me.

"When are we going to take the reading test?" I ask.

"The test is after lunch today," she answers. "But we will do a review before."

"Okay Mrs. Wenninger," I reply as I grab my pencil from my desk.

Mrs. Wenninger claps her hands, "Class we will be doing the review for the test now. Please take out your pencil and get an office." I stand up and walk over to the box with all the white cardboard offices that we put on desks. The box is in the back of the room. But I'm in the front row so I usually get the last one. Which is the bad one: it doesn't stay upright and it is ripped.

When we are all back at our desks Mrs. Wenninger asks, "Does anyone have any questions?" Nobody raises their hand. The room gets quiet. All I hear is pencils writing on paper. The first question is who is the main character in the book? I raise my hand.

"Mrs. Wenninger, what is the text we read?" I ask. "I don't remember any of it."

"We read it on Monday," she replies.

"I wasn't here on Monday. I had a doctor appointment," I remind her.

"Oh, well then you can read it today," she tells me. "You will take the test tomorrow."

"Okay," I reply as I stand up. "What book is it?"

"It's called What did I do?" she tells me. I turn around and when I walk past Ally she turns to her twin sister Ashley, smiles, and whispers in a 'I'm pretending to whisper voice,'

"Of course she gets to not take the test," She says loudly. "She's such a teacher's pet." That gets a reaction from the class. Everyone starts giggling. Except for two people, Cassie and Grace. They're my only friends in the whole school. I just keep walking but I feel like turning to her and screaming in her face "Stop it! Why do you have to be so mean to me?" But I don't because then I will get in even more trouble than I already am in. I don't need any more trouble. One time I yelled at Ally and got grounded. Plus I got detention! Although detention isn't that bad. At least when I have detention I get to sit and read my book.

Once I get to the back of the room I grab the book off the shelf. Then I return to my desk and look at the book, What did I do? I figure this out pretty quickly. It's not like books I usually read. It has a very intriguing cover. A girl's backpack is laying on the ground and the title is on a piece of notebook paper that is by the backpack. The genre is mystery and so far I really like it. The bell rings just as I finish chapter two.

"You can all go to lunch. We will have more time after lunch to do this," Mrs. Wenninger informs us. I grab my lunch and head outside. Here in California we eat lunch outside. I push open the big blue doors and walk across the great lawn to my usual table. Not long after I sit down I hear my friend Grace come up behind me.

"Hey!" She calls to me as I turn to face her.

"Hey Grace!" I yell back to my best friend. Then I notice someone behind her. "Oh! Hey Cassie! Didn't see you there." Cassie is my other best friend. The three of us have known each other since we were five. When they come to sit down I notice something different about Cassie. I gasp.

"Cassie you got a haircut!" I exclaim. Only because I am so happy for her. She said she was so scared to get a haircut. So was I when I decided to get my first haircut. I cried the whole time.

"Does it look bad?" Cassie asks shyly.

"No, it looks great," I say because she is my friend and besides it really does look good. I mean really good.

"I think it looks bad," she says while she looks down at the ground.

"No it doesn't. Why are you so sad today?" I ask because I am concerned the usually happy and cheerful Cassie is replaced by a sad and gloomy Cassie today.

"Just because I think people are staring at me," she says.

"Well they aren't. And you look great," I tell her.

"You really think so?" she asks.

"I know so," I give her a huge smile and then go back to eating.

We sit in silence for the rest of lunch checking the clock every once in a while. It seems like it takes two hours for the bell to ring. I pick up my lunchbox and head inside. My locker is really tall, the tallest one in the school probably. I throw my lunchbox in my locker and walk into the classroom.

The next subject we have is reading. Even though I am super tired I manage to pay attention. I don't even notice when the bell rings. I usually jump up when I hear it.

"Have a good evening!" yells Mrs. Wenninger as we all push and shove to get into the hall. "Oh. And before I forget. Emily! Come talk to me for a second."

I turn around and walk over to her, "Yes Mrs. Wenninger?" My voice is shaky and my hands are sweaty when I speak to her.

"I want to talk to your parents about this homework problem," she calmly explains. "That's all. So, can you ask your parents to meet with me tomorrow?"

"Yes I will tell them." I gulp at the thought of having to explain myself in front of my parents.

"Ok good," she tells me. "You can go now, we are done talking."

By the time I get to my dad's classroom Albert is already there. He is sitting at the back table reading a book. My dad looks up from his computer screen when he hears me walk into the room.

"Hi sweetie," he says. "Is something wrong?"

"Well as a matter of fact," I pause then say, "yes."

"What is it?" He is concerned that something is wrong.

"Tomorrow I need you to come to a meeting in my classroom. About the homework thing," I tell him.

He sighs, "Emily we've been over this. Do your homework." He looks really mad.

"I did do it, but then I forgot it in my bookbag," I confess.

"Your mom will not be happy," he says and then looks back at his computer screen.

"Well, she has to come to the meeting too." He looks less happy than when he did before.

"Ok, well then, you will tell her." He continues, "I was going to, but I think you should tell her."

"Fine it's a deal," I agree. I hope Mom isn't too mad when she finds out what the meeting is for.

My dad stands up. "Ok kiddos. Let's hit the trail," he says cheerfully. I'm glad to see that he is acting like himself again. I pick up my bookbag and run out the door. "Emily!" my father calls after me, "Come back!"

I turn around and see that I am more than halfway to the stairs. "Oh sorry!" I yell back. I run all the way back to the classroom.

"Why did you run off?" my dad asks me with concern.

"I was just so excited to um go home," I stammer. I actually wanted to get lost so I wouldn't have to face Mom.

"Okay," he says slowly. "Come on Albert we've got to go, and Emily please follow me." We all walk to the car. My dad looks back at me every once in a while. Probably to check that I am still there I think.

When we get in the car my dad says, "Now where did we leave off with that conversation?" he calmly asks out loud.

"What conversation?" I ask. Then I remember, "Oh. That little argument about rights."

"So, I told you my reasons," he says turning on the car. He must think I remember them. I don't. "What are yours?" he asks me as I try to remember my reasons.

"Well I guess I just think that because," I pause and think, "In some parts of the world not all kids get to go to school. Some kids don't have a school near them or cannot afford to. I still think they should get a shot at going to school. And when they want to drop out, they can. Although," I continue, "They at least have to go through a year of middle school." As I look into the rear view mirror I see a look of pride spread across his face.

He says, "Well those are some pretty good reasons. You also have a good plan on how to deal with the school for everybody. So I guess you win." At that he pulls into an ice cream shop parking lot and unlocks the car doors.

"Dad what are we doing?" I am more confused than ever. "Why are we at the ice cream shop?"

"Your mom wanted to meet us here," he replies casually. "For a little treat."

"Before dinner!" I exclaim. Not because I love eating vegetables and all that healthy stuff but because Mom never lets us have treats before dinner. "Really?"

"Yes really," he laughs. "Since when do we ever lie about treats like ice cream?"

"You did last night. And the night before, and the night before that..." I could go on and on but Dad interrupts me.

"Okay so once in a while I do that," He sighs and opens the door for us. "So what do you guys want here?" he asks us.

"Can I get anything I want?" Albert asks hoping that Dad says yes.

But of course, he doesn't. "No, you can get one scoop of ice cream with one topping. That goes for both of you." He looks from me to Albert. My brother decides to get chocolate, I get chocolate with cookie dough, my dad gets mint chip and my mom gets an ice cream sundae called The Monkey. We go find a booth when we all get our ice cream. I tell my mom about the meeting tomorrow. She seems fine with it, but I know she is mad.

On the car ride home she says, "I heard you won that argument with you and your dad."

When my dad hears this he says, "Yeah she kicked my butt! I don't know how I got so lucky with a wonderful daughter." He looks proud of me.

"Yes, I did beat you," I say calmly then I turn and look out the window.

"Your dad told me about it," She informs me.

My dad pulls into the driveway and we all get out. When I step inside I decide to do my homework before I do anything else. All I have to do tonight are some math papers and read the book *What Did I Do?* for the test tomorrow. I decide to do what I don't want to do first, math. It may be my best subject but that doesn't mean I love to do it. Although today's math isn't that hard. Just division, multiplication and fractions. I finish the math papers quickly and finish the rest of *What did I do?* The book was really good.

"Dinner is ready!" my mom yells from the kitchen. The kitchen smells like chili with a hint of basil. I grab a bowl and get some food. I sit down at my usual spot at the table. Mom sits right across from me. "What time do I have to be at the school tomorrow? Or will you guys come and pick me up?" my mom asks as she tastes the chili.

I decide to take a bite of chili too. It tastes like grandmas but that can't be right she doesn't put basil in her chili. "Mom, what recipe did you use for this?" I ask.

"Your grandmother's recipe darling," she replies.

"But that recipe doesn't have basil in it," I remind her.

"Ok, I used her recipe and added basil to it!" She looks annoyed. "Is that so bad?"

"No, I was just wondering. It actually is quite good," I tell her as my dad and Albert sit down at the table.

"I just added it for a little more flavor. You still haven't answered my question though," She reminds me. My dad and brother don't seem to notice we are there at the table with them. They seem to be off in La La Land.

"Oh right, you have to be there at three o'clock. I think we are picking you up," I reply.

"Ok just wanted to make sure." She looks fine now even though a minute ago she was really annoyed.

When I finish my chili I put my bowl and spoon in the sink. Then I turn on the TV so my dad and I can watch the finale of our favorite show, *Lego Masters*. We watch the finale and our favorite team wins. We are going to watch another show but then we hear.

"Bedtime!" My mom yells from the kitchen while she washes dishes. I scramble up the stairs faster than anyone else. Mostly because I am tired and want to go to bed. My brother comes up when I am done brushing my teeth and am starting to read my favorite library book.

"Emily! Where are you?" Albert yells even though he is right outside my door and my light is on.

"Goodnight!" I yell and turn off my light. I don't want to talk to him right now. I can hear him go to his room. He reads for 10 minutes every night. I read for 20 minutes every night. Well, except for tonight. I fall asleep within 15 minutes.

"Emily," Albert whispers and shakes me until I finally wake up.

"Go back to sleep," I say sleepily.

"We need to get to school." He rolls his eyes as he says this. I know why he is giving me the stink eye. Another one of my responsibilities is to wake him up.

"Ok," I yawn. "I'll get up, just leave me alone."

"Fine," He groans and heads back to his room.

I get a white tank top, blue jeans and my purple pink sweatshirt. I brush my hair and teeth. The kitchen doesn't smell like anything except for coffee. Ewwwwww! I get a bowl, milk, and peanut butter crunch cereal.

"Good you're awake," My dad yawns as he gets a cup of coffee.

"Yeah, um Albert woke me up," I confess.

"What?" he sighs. "We've been over this. You wake him up."

"Sorry," I say as I sit down at the table wondering how I can remember that responsibility too.

"Anyway, what time is the meeting today?" he asks. I can tell he is trying to change the subject.

"Three o'clock. Are we picking up Mom?" I ask.

"Yes," He replies as he sits down next to me.

"Okay because that is what I told her yesterday, so I was just making sure I was right," I yawn. Why does Albert have to wake me up so early?

I already know that answer. Because he says the early bird gets the worm. Whatever that means. I'm so nervous. This afternoon will not be good. I want to play sick so I don't have to go. But then they would just reschedule it. So I guess I have to suffer the consequences today. I don't know what they are, but they are probably pretty big. You see I've been doing this since second grade. I've had about a billion meetings about it. Yet for some reason I don't know why I'm doing it. I just started not turning in homework when I got my first C-. That's almost a D! Then I must have thought 'Why Me?' Of all the people in the world why do I have to be the one that doesn't remember anything? So then I thought the whole world was against me. Or maybe it was that—

My thoughts are interrupted by my brother, "Emily! Come on," he shouts like I'm eighty years old and can't hear him. For your information I can hear him just fine. Apparently, he doesn't know that. I jump up and run out the door. Albert runs after me.

"Slow down," he pants. When he finally gets in the car Dad and I are already there. He looks like he's about to faint even though he only ran about five feet.

The car ride to school is unusually quiet. When my dad pulls into the parking lot he and Albert get out like robots. Once we get inside Albert turns and heads toward the kindergarten pod. I go straight ahead toward the stairs to go upstairs to the fourth-grade pod. My dad follows slowly behind me. I run up the stairs and go to my locker. With my homework in my hands I walk into the classroom. I hear three people gasp as I walk in with the papers and the book in my hands. I hand it all to my teacher. She raises her eyebrows when she sees what it is.

"Is this what I think it is?" she asks hopefully. I only nod my head. Thinking that if I say something she'll start crying. Also, I don't know what to say so I just walk back to my seat. When I sit down I can feel Ally glaring at me. She liked me not being in the spotlight. She liked it when I didn't have pride. Well guess what? I do now! But still I can't help but feel a chill go down my spine.

"So you finally got up the courage to give that to her?" she hisses like a snake.

I whip around and say, "Hey! You don't get to talk to me like that. And I'm not going to let you walk all over me anymore. So quit it." I turn back to face the front when I finish talking. She says something else but I barely hear her. It's like she's an ant and I'm a bird. It feels good to have taken away her power of making me feel bad about myself.

The rest of the day is so good I forget what the afternoon will bring. I get an A- on my reading test and I get an A+ on my math test. At lunch it's not awkward and silent like yesterday was. I forget about the meeting until the final bell rings. Because then somehow I'm magically in a chair with my parents next to me. Facing my teacher! She does not look happy. My parents don't look happy either. Although Albert is as happy as a clam. Only because he doesn't know why we are here.

"Do you know why we are having this meeting?" my teacher asks my mom and dad. They nod their heads. Then she turns to me, "Do you?"

All I can say is, "Yes," and nod my head.

Now Albert looks worried. He knows now that this is not a happy time. It's never a happy time at one of these meetings. I had one in the first semester. My brother wasn't there for that one. My mom stayed home with him. That wasn't as bad. Mom is more concerned about this than Dad. My thoughts are interrupted by my teacher.

"As you know," she says calmly, "Your daughter has not been turning in her homework like the other kids in her class."

My dad says, "We know."

"No, she has been turning in her homework," my mom snaps.

"Well, I think we should ask her," My teacher says. Then she looks at me, "Go on."

"Um... well the truth is. The truth is, I haven't been turning in my homework," I confess. "Mom I told you that I did because I didn't want you to be mad. But now I've just made a big mess. Well not a big mess, a huge one."

"Well then, there's the truth for you," my teacher replies happily because I finally told the truth. "You may go now. The meeting is over," she tells us.

My family and I walk outside quietly. Even my usually chatty brother is quiet. Nobody says anything until we get home. All that my dad says is, "We're home," though and he says it sadly.

Mom looks annoyed, Albert looks glad to be home, and Dad looks stunned. I think It's because I've never ever lied before. Not even when I want a piece of candy when we get home but my dad stopped and bought cookies and I had one but I want another so I tell my mom I haven't had one yet. Which I have never done.

"Mom, Dad. Can I talk to you in the living room please?" I ask them and then walk into the living room.

They follow me and we all sit down on the couch. Since they just sit there quietly, I say, "I am so sorry that happened. It wasn't right to lie and I should've never done that."

"You should be sorry," my dad says. "But I forgive you."

"I don't," my mom says angrily. "Give me one reason I should."

"Because I'm really really sorry?" I say in my nicest voice.

She takes a breath. "Emily turning in your homework is your responsibility. That means you have to do it yourself, and you didn't do it," she replies even grumpier than before.

"I know it is my responsibility, and I know that I shouldn't have lied to you and Dad. That was not okay. I guess I didn't want to disappoint you," I shamefully say. "But I am really sorry. Even if you can't forgive me, I still want to make you proud."

"Yes, you shouldn't have done that," my dad says.

"Well what are you going to do?" My mom folds her arms. "I'm listening."

"I am going to make you a promise," I say reluctantly. "The promise is that I will always turn in my homework. If you get a note or a call from my teacher saying I didn't I will do double my chores for the week you get that call. If that is a good deal."

"It is. And by the way, when I said sorry doesn't cut it, I was just pretending. I will always forgive you no matter what you do." At that she stands up and gives me a big warm hug. Of course my dad and brother join in too.

When my whole family hugs me, I feel warm and safe. This is how I always want it to be. I will always keep my promise. And I will never ever lie to my family again.

Lindzi and Her Magic Bunny

By Reagan Steffen, Grade 4

Tri-City United Le Center Elementary, Le Center

Chapter One: Not So Excited

Hey there, I'm Lindzi Lee! My dad and I do magic shows together (but it's his job not mine, I just help him). I live in a suburb of New York City. Maybe you are thinking that I go to New York City a lot, but I don't really. Another thing, my Mom died when I was only three years old. It's just been me and my dad ever since.

Now that you know all about me, I can tell you why I am so anxious. So, yesterday my dad walked up to Pocus and me when we were playing a game that I first thought of when I got her at the farm seven years ago when I saw her jump so high. He told me that we had another magic act in two days! And if you were listening you would've heard that I said yesterday and that he said two days so it's the next day. That means IT'S TOMORROW!

You might be wondering why am I so scared. I have been doing this with my dad for so long, but it's at my school! If I have not told you much about myself, I get bullied. Now don't feel bad because I have gotten used to it and I have a friend to talk to, but I have to talk in front of everybody! Not just my class, not just my grade, but THE WHOLE

SCHOOL!

"Lindzi are you asleep yet?" my dad said walking in. Well, I wasn't sleeping but I was putting Pocus in the cutest outfits I had found. "Don't forget we have a special performance tomorrow!" my dad said excitedly as he closed the door.

I wish I could say that as excitedly as he did, but it was not going to come out of my mouth. I looked at Pocus, and she looked back at me. Tomorrow was NOT going to be fun.

Chapter Two: The Day

I could not get out of bed the next day. I CANNOT go to school. I just need to make up a little white lie and maybe, just maybe, dad will believe me.

"Dad, I don't feel so good," I said, a little woozy and holding Pocus in one arm. She did not like that one bit because she squirmed out of my arm and hopped to the floor.

"Nice try, Lindzi, I'm not falling for that one," he said confidently.

Dang it! I should've remembered that he was a middle child. Once at supper he explained how many jokes he made and all the pranks. He said that his mom was so mad and had to have a babysitter for the family until his eldest brother was twenty-five.

"Lindzi, I know that you might not want to do this but it's not like you will die," he said. Oh, but I WILL die!

Chapter Three: The Plan

The plan was that I would go to school for three hours or so then my dad and Pocus would come and we would practice. Then when it was about 11:30, the kids would start gathering in the gymnasium. I was so nervous it was hard to practice and not think about us performing.

It was time. People started to come in from the big doors. The older kids went through the left doors and the younger grades went through the right doors. My grade would go through the left doors (by the way, I am in the sixth grade) because our school is K-8 so our grade is the youngest oldest-grade.

Chapter Four: It's Time

When I saw all the students I knew it was time to do our thing. My dad had to step out of the way so the principal could introduce us. Pocus was sitting in my arms as if saying, 'Come on Lindzi! You can do this, it's not that hard. I will be right next to you!' Ok, I know that bunnies can't talk but I needed to take my mind off of all the people that could be watching me right now.

"Come on, Lindzi, Mr. T is done talking," he said walking out. I followed him, extremely nervous. My palms were getting sweaty, but I quickly wiped them before we were visible. I had to do it one at a time because I was holding Pocus. It was a little difficult but it's not like she is THAT heavy.

We walked out into the middle of our school logo, the chocolate Labrador. My dad started us off with, "Hello!, I am Jacob, this is my daughter, Lindzi." I heard a little cheering in the direction of the sixth-grade seats. I smiled a little and blushed, my dad went on, "And her magic bunny, Pocus." I raised her a little bit higher. "And now we will start."

"So Lindzi, what do you have in that bag there?" he said facing me,

"Well, I have some chocolate that I was going to eat just now," I replied. It was hard to remember some of the things I was going to say but when my dad said his line before, I automatically knew what to say. My dad grabbed the bag out of my hands.

"Hmmm." He looked at it and tipped the bag over which made the chocolate bar fall out "accidentally" then picked it back up, put it back in the bag and shook it up. Then took it out and the form of the chocolate bar completely changed from the form of a rectangle into a Labrador. We finished that trick and I set Pocus down.

"Jump, Pocus," I said to her and she jumped higher than I have ever seen her jump. I heard people gasp and cheer.

I picked her up and my dad and I bowed. Finally, we were done. We did at least six tricks but it seemed pretty quick. It actually wasn't that bad, well not as bad as I thought it was going to be.

Chapter Five: Going Home Tired

I finished the school day with nobody talking bad to me and I was kind of surprised, but it doesn't really matter because I only realized that when I got home. But my BFF, Emily did talk to me A LOT after the show. When I got on the bus for home it just seemed like a normal day but the best part of after the show is that dad didn't have to bring Pocus home. I got to keep her for the rest of the day in school! I only stayed in the homeroom for a few hours.

Overall, today was pretty good. I took a seat on the bus and held Pocus close to me. She fell asleep in my arms and I almost did too.

Homework and Home

By Olivia Trotman, Grade 4

Lakeview Elementary School, Albert Lea

Maddie was in her room with her big sister Ashley. "Time to do your homework!" Maddie's mom yelled from the kitchen.

"Who are you talking to?" Maddie and Ashley yelled at the same time.

"I am talking to Maddie," their mom yelled back. Ashley ran downstairs with Maddie right behind her.

"Why do I have so many responsibilities?" Maddie said in a frustrated voice. "Ashley should have more responsibilities," Maddie continued.

"Hey, don't give Mom any ideas," Ashley told Maddie.

Even though Maddie did NOT want to do her homework, as always she did it anyway. Today her homework was six pages long but that was only her math homework. Maddie was finally done with her homework.

"I'm done with my homework!" Maddie called down the stairs.

"Okay, now clean your room," her mom called back.

"Why?" Maddie asked.

"Because it is VERY messy," her mom answered.

Maddie started to clean her room when her phone chimed. She went over to it and she started to cry. She ran down the stairs and into the kitchen where her mom and sister were.

"What's wrong?" her Mom asked.

"I saw an ad where there were a lot of people who were homeless. I feel bad. Can we donate food, clothes or something so they can be safe? PLEASE!" Maddie said, still crying. "It is a right to have a home!"

"Sure," her mom said looking confused. It was unusual to see Maddie upset.

They went to the homeless shelter mentioned in the ad and gave them clothes, food and a little money.

"Thank you," one of the people told them. They got in the car and started going home. The car ride home was as quiet as a young kid tapping a wall while they tried to fall asleep. When they got home they all went into their own rooms.

"Why weren't you at gymnastics?" Maddie's friend Hailey said just as Maddie picked up her phone that was as loud as a fire alarm.

"Because I went to a place," Maddie answered.

"What place?" Hailey asked.

"Just a place," Maddie answered. "Oh fine, I went to a place and donated things for homeless people."

Maddie really didn't want to talk about it.

After she hung up with Hailey, her family all fell asleep. In the morning they all got out of bed and went into the hallway. Then Maddie and Ashley sat on the bench until their mom got out of the bathroom. After that Maddie and Ashley raced into the bathroom so fast you could barely see them. Maddie got in there before Ashley. After they got ready they walked to school together and on their way they saw their friend. Well, Maddie's friend.

"Hey, Maddie!" Hailey yelled from the other side of the sidewalk.

"Hi, Hailey!" Maddie yelled back to her.

Hailey walked with them to school. When they got to school they all walked to their classes. Hailey and Maddie were in the same class together but Ashley was in a different grade and class. When Hailey and Maddie got in the classroom they did the activity that was on the board.

"Good morning girls," their teacher Ms. Gagnon greeted them as they went to sit down.

"Morning!" They both said at the same time.

"Class can I please have your attention," Ms. Gagnon told the class. Everyone looked at Ms. Gagnon. "Today we are going to be having a special visitor," Ms. Gagnon continued.

"I wonder who it is?" Maddie told Hailey.

"Yeah I am wondering too. I hope it is someone in the Olympics," Hailey said hopefully.

"Uhhhhhhhhhh," Maddie said zoning out.

"Maddie what are you thinking about?" Hailey asked Maddie.

"Nothing, huh," Maddie answered.

"Snap out of it," Hailey told Maddie.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how all of those people should have the right to have food, money, clean clothes and shelter," Maddie said still a bit zoned out.

"What people?" Hailey asked.

"All the homeless people. They looked so sad," Maddie answered.

"Well, I know it is very sad but what do we do about it?" Hailey asked Maddie hoping Maddie would know.

"We could go to them and try and help them?" Maddie asked.

"Yes of course we can!" Hailey told Maddie excitedly. "How about after school I sleepover and we can ask your mom if we can make a little project where people can donate things if they can or want to. Then we can help homeless people," Hailey suggested. "I think we should include in our project why we think they should have a right to have a home," Hailey continued.

"Oh yeah, we should add that in," Maddie answered. "YES please, also because I never answered you about even doing the project," Maddie said excitedly.

When they were done with school they both walked to Maddie's house. When they got to the end of the first block from the school they stopped. Maddie texted her mom to ask if Hailey could sleepover. Her mom said that she could. When they got to Maddie's house they started on their project.

"Do you want to make the sign for our project or should I?" Hailey asked Maddie.

"You can do the sign," Maddie told Hailey.

"Okay thanks," Hailey said thankfully. She liked making things. Hailey started working on the sign and Maddie started working on the donation bucket. After a couple of hours they were so tired.

"Girls come downstairs for supper!" Maddie's mom yelled from the kitchen. Hailey, Maddie and Ashley all raced down to the kitchen.

"What are we eating?" Hailey asked.

"We are having mashed potatoes with gravy. For the side we are having green beans." Maddie's mom told them. They all started eating at the same time. Maddie was the first one done and she had THREE plates. Everyone else hadn't even finished their first plate.

"When are you going to be done eating?" Maddie asked Hailey.

"In a bit," Hailey answered.

"Well can you finish quickly?" Maddie asked Hailey.

"I don't know. Why do you keep asking questions?" Hailey asked.

"Because I want to keep working on our project," Maddie said impatiently.

"Okay. I was just wondering," Hailey told Maddie.

When Hailey was done with supper she and Maddie ran upstairs to Maddie's room.

"So, what are you going to write on the sign?" Maddie asked Hailey.

"I am going to write, If You Want To Donate, This is The Place For You!" Hailey answered.

"I love it," Maddie said excitedly. They started to draw and write. Maddie was drawing fruit for the food. And

Hailey was writing *If You Want To Donate, This is the Place For You*.

"Wait, I just realized something," Maddie said worriedly, "We don't have a title for our project!" Maddie said hopefully to Hailey.

"Oh yeah. I just realized that too," Hailey answered. "Oh no," Hailey continued sounding worried because they needed a title.

"What are we going to do?" Maddie asked.

"Why don't we ask your mom," Hailey suggested.

"Yeah, why not," Maddie said, calming down. They raced down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Btyrstkjbfngsdyjchfd!" Hailey and Maddie said at the same time their words jumbling together.

"I can't understand you." Maddie's mom said confused. "I heard, btyrstkjbfngsdyjchfd," Maddie's mom continued.

"Sorry," Maddie answered, "I will go first," Maddie said as she walked a bit closer to her mom. "What should we do? We don't have a title for our project. We don't know how we are going to come up with a title," Maddie continued.

"How about you do your homework right now and then after you can work on the title," Maddie's mom answered them.

"But Mom," Maddie said begging.

"No buts, you need to do your work for school, it is your responsibility," said Maddie's mom.

"Fine," Maddie said as she walked up the stairs with Hailey behind her.

"What homework do you have?" Maddie asked Hailey.

"I have math, science and social studies." Hailey answered. "How about you?" Hailey continued.

"I have the same as you do." Maddie answered. Maddie started to work on math, Hailey started to work on social studies. Hailey had three pages for social studies and Maddie had three pages for math.

"I wonder what we are going to learn next week," Maddie thought to herself. When they were done with most of their homework they started cleaning Maddie's room so they had space to do their project for the homeless shelter.

"We should take a break from our project and do some chores around the house," Maddie suggested.

"Why?" Hailey asked.

"Because we have responsibilities. Also, my mom would like it if I do my responsibilities now instead of later." Maddie answered. "Will you help me?"

"Sure," answered Hailey.

"I wonder what other people are thinking," Maddie thought to herself not knowing she said it out loud.

"I wonder what other people are thinking too," Hailey said as Maddie looked at Hailey in amazement.

"How did you know I thought that?" Maddie asked, still amazed.

"Because you said that out loud," Hailey answered.

"I didn't say that out loud I just thought about it," Maddie said now confused. They didn't talk about it anymore. They started cleaning Maddie's room. Then they cleaned the kitchen and the bathroom. Then they worked in the living room. When they were done, they were exhausted.

"I am so tired," Maddie told Hailey.

"Me too," Hailey answered.

"Now we have to finish our homework," Maddie told Hailey out of breath. They both ran up the stairs and into Maddie's room. After that they started to finish their project to help the homeless shelter. When they finished they went to bed. After sleeping all night they woke up they put on their clothes. They ran into the kitchen, sat down on a chair. They ate as fast as cheetahs.

"Hey, what is the rush?" Ashley asked Maddie and Hailey.

"We have to go to the mall before we go to school," Maddie said as she and Hailey were almost out the door. They got on their bikes and rode them to the mall. When they got there they took out the supplies they had made and they set it up in the middle of the mall.

"After school we will check on the project," Maddie told Hailey.

"Why do we have to go to school?" Hailey asked Maddie, wanting to stay at the mall.

"Because that is one of our responsibilities," Maddie answered. "We need to go to school so we can learn."

When they were done with school they rode their bikes to the mall. When Maddie and Hailey got to the mall they grabbed all the donations and took them to the homeless shelter. After delivering their donations Hailey and Maddie watched the happy people.

"Thank you!" All the people told Maddie and Hailey. Their project had helped people.

Regina's Pet Pandemonium

By Sophia Williams, Grade 5

Ellendale Elementary, Ellendale

At Ashtown-Cedarbrook-Newton Elementary in Cedarbrook, Minnesota, spunky little seven-year-old Regina DeLaCampe and her friends were sitting down at their lunch table.

"Guys!" shouted Regina. "Guess what!"

"What?" asked Summer and Winter simultaneously. They're identical twins with curly dark hair and dark eyes.

"I want a pet!" Regina beamed proudly. Straight-A Mercie's eyes boggled out of her head.

"No, trust me, Regina, you don't. You'll be exhausted with her. Him. Whatever. Just... you'll be in over your head. You don't want one."

"Yes, I do, too and you can't tell me otherwise."

"Otherwise," corrected blonde Daisy before blushing.

"Pets are hard work," said sports loving Logan. "Trust me." Regina trusted him. But she was Regina DeLaCampe. She could do anything!

"Trust him, DeLaCampe," Regina's cousin Axel pleaded.

"I've got a guinea pig," Daisy said, blushing crimson. "Sammy lives in my room."

"Does she smell?" asked Summer. Mimi the Mime fanned at her nose. Summer nodded. "He does."

Axel and Logan dissolved into hysterical laughter.

"EEW!" shrieked Winter and MaryAnne. Axel fell onto the floor, laughing.

"Get up, boy," barked the lunch monitor. He did. Sadly. Regina always found Axel-Lunch Monitor battles quite entertaining. Today was no exception.

"Pets are hard work, cousin. My yorkie is utter torture. Princessa yippity-yaps all. Day. Long," MaryAnne said decisively. Whatever thought Regina. Y'all can't put me down. I'm so getting a pet!

Later, Regina jumped off the bus and bolted home. She busted in the front door.

"Momma!" she cried.

"Hi, honey," said Momma coming over to hug her.

"I," paused Regina "Want a pet."

"I'll talk to your Daddy about that." Please, thought Regina, keep it quick.

The next hour dragged on as Regina waited to hear Momma and Daddy say, 'Yes, you can get a pet'. But when Regina sat down for dinner, Daddy said, "I'm sorry, Regina. Momma and I don't quite think you're ready for a pet yet." Regina wilted.

"But," Momma cut in swiftly. "We will let you get a plant." Regina nodded and poked at her mashed potatoes. "If you can take care of your plant for, say, six weeks, we might get you a hamster." A plant. A measly plant. A boring, measly plant. But then, inspiration struck! I'll pick out a plant at the greenhouse and call it my pet!

On Saturday, Regina strode out of the greenhouse with her parents and a box of pre-planted Kentucky bluegrass. She named her grass Kent, short for Kentucky. Kent found his home on the DeLaCampe's 'thing sticking out of the roof.' Daddy helped Regina make a sign that said, 'KENT,' in green paint. She would water Kent every day and take his lid off every day so he could get sunlight. Oh, and put it back on so he could keep warm. Yep. Definitely put it back on. Very, very important. Very important.

She then decided to call Krystina, who had been absent when Regina had announced that she wanted a pet. Regina dialed.

"Hello, Hayes residence. Who is it, please."

"Hi, Krystina, it's Regina!" Regina could almost smell Krystina's vanilla bean scent.

"What's up, Regina???"

"I, Regina DeLaCampe, got a pet!" Regina heard Krystina gasp into the phone. "Kent is Kentucky bluegrass."

"Is it a dog?" asked Krystina, clearly confused.

"Graaass." said Regina slowly. "The green stuff on the lawn."

"Oh. Nice! Can I see him soon?"

"Yeah. Bye, Krystina!"

"Later, Regina."

After school on Thursday, Regina plopped down onto her red shag rug and rested her head on her red bedspread. Ah. What bliss. When I get my hamster-

"Regina!" called Daddy. Her hamster-embellished daydream had been interrupted by Daddy using his hippo voice.

"No homework," Regina yelled back.

"Water the plant!" he replied.

On the roof, Regina took the lid off of Kent. She danced for him. She hummed her favorite song, Walking on Sunshine. She watered him while dancing for him, which caused her to drop the watering can. The can fell and broke the lid of Kent's box into a dozen pieces. Oops. She stopped humming and scuttled back inside. She couldn't tell Momma and Daddy, 'cause then, they'd think that she was very irresponsible and a horrible plant owner and she'd never get a hamster.

The next day, Friday, when Regina went to water Kent, something was seriously wrong. He was all brown. She watered him extra. But when he still didn't perk up, she told Daddy, who had said, "Let's see him, then." He sounds so professional, thought Regina.

"Regina? Where's his lid?"

"I- um- I- it, uh, broke."

"How!?" Daddy was mortified.

"Well, I might've been dancing while watering, and..." Daddy nodded. He looked disappointed.

"Honey, we can only try to revive him." Regina nodded. That made sense. But she had let him down. And now, she would never get a hamster. Clouds floated over the sun. She went inside to her room to cry.

Later, after dinner, Momma and Daddy said that Regina had a visitor. It was Aunt Laura! Dad's younger sister didn't have any kids.

"Regina," Daddy said. "Jack Frost had a critical visit last night. I'm afraid that Kendra didn't make it." Regina didn't even bother saying that his name is Kent. Was Kent. She sat down on the sofa next to Aunt Laura as her eyes welled up.

"But I have a present for you!" said Aunt Laura, smiling her bright, sunshiny smile. She held out a terra cotta pot containing some earth and 2 tiny cacti.

"Cactuses!" shouted Regina gleefully.

"Those cacti only need watering about once a month, but they need almost constant sunlight."

"Okay. Thankyouthankyouthankyou!!"

"You're welcome, Gummy Bear."

That night as she lay, tucked into her red comforter, Regina was sad that Aunt Laura left, but she was glad that she'd come. Wow, she thought. Aunt Laura must be magical!

The next morning, since there was no school on weekends, Regina inspected the succulents closer, and noticed that one was actually sort of purple! They were called Kent II and Katelina. (Katelina was the purple one.)

Later that day, Momma and Daddy had a talk with Regina and said if she could keep Kendra II and Kathy alive for six weeks, Regina would get a hamster from the pet shop at the local mini mall. This time, Regina did remind her parents that the cactuses names were Kent II and Katelina.

Kent II and Katelina lived happily in their terra cotta pot in Regina's room and were still alive last time I saw the Regina, so, if you want to know if she got her hamster or not, I'll just say that I wish you could've seen how priceless her face was when she heard the excited pitter-patter of tiny paws blended with the squeaks of a hamster wheel outside her door.

NONFICTION

Buddy

By Ava Boswell, Grade 7

Dakota Meadows Middle School, Mankato

It was April 26, 2019, 8:10 p.m. At that very moment, I was feeling like my heart was going to fall out of my chest. My hands were shaking, and my eyes were flooding with tears. I knew what my mom was going to tell me before she could say anything at all. I learned to value the time you have with all living things, before they are gone.

I have always loved animals, especially dogs, so when anyone I knew got a new puppy, I was always excited to meet them. This dog was different. He was the cutest thing ever, his fur was white and brown, his eyes one blue and one green, and his personality was sweet and energetic.

On April 15, a puppy named Buddy was brought into our lives. My cousins got Buddy as a surprise for their parents. When I first met him he was shy and scared. I would go over to their house to play with him and watch him grow. His physical appearance changed but also his personality. He was starting to become more comfortable and was getting to be a little more of a daredevil. I was getting closer to him and even getting closer to my cousins. Before Buddy, after school everyone would go their separate ways. Buddy inspired us to spend more time together.

Two weeks later, I decided to go with friends to the mall after school. This was the one day I did not go to my cousins house since they adopted Buddy. My friends and I were all having a good time and I did not know that in just a few hours I would be so sad. We left the mall and were dropping my friends off. Then, my mom got a phone call from my stepdad. He was at my cousin's house with buddy and my uncle. It was nice outside so they were sitting on the porch. Buddy was not on a leash because they did not think that he could get down the stairs. All of a sudden, he ran toward the road. My stepdad and uncle chased him, trying to get him off the road, but there was a car coming toward Buddy. My uncle was doing all he could by screaming and waving his hands over his head, but the car did not stop. Buddy was hit. My stepdad sprung into action by picking him up and trying to revive him. It was too late. Buddy hit his head too hard and passed away.

My step-dad was on the phone with my mom, crying and telling her what happened. All I could hear and remember at that moment was my mom's face looking heartbroken and her tone of voice going from normal to mournful. I heard her say "he got hit?" and "is he breathing?" I just knew what she was going to say when she got off the phone.

We rushed over to my cousin's house and as we were pulling into the driveway, I didn't know if I could make myself get out of the car. But knew I would regret it if I didn't. As I got out of the car, I felt sick.. When I looked up, I saw one of my cousins crying so we went over and gave her a hug. We all cried together. We got to spend one last night with Buddy. It was really hard to see him lying there, knowing he wasn't going to bounce back up. He did not look like he had been hit by a car. That night we all sat around him as we cried our hearts out and shared memories we gained over his short life.

Nine months later my cousins adopted a new puppy. He will never replace Buddy. They are different in many ways. The new puppy helps the family heal their sorrows. Every day I still think about how Buddy's accident could have been prevented. If the driver was not distracted, maybe he would still be here. This makes me value the time I have with people and animals around me, because at any moment, they could all be gone.

Getting a Dog

By Sofia Fritzke, Grade 6

Jordan Middle School, Jordan

Have you ever in your life wanted a dog? Although your parents have said no many times, you still want one? When I was born, we already had a Labrador retriever named Kodi. He was two when I was born, so he was already well-trained. We ran into no issues with him, and he was loving, caring and the perfect dog!

Me, being the young kid, thought all dogs were like him. Even though we had Kodi, I wanted another dog. I begged and begged and still did not get a yes, so I gave up for a while. A month after I reached the age of 11, we got the news that we had to put Kodi down; his arthritis was getting worse, and he was in pain all the time.

When the day came, there were tears and much pain. Me, being the pet lover I am, didn't stop asking for another pet. I really wanted another dog, but there was one problem: it was winter, and that is not the time to get a puppy.

When January came, we went on a trip and couldn't get a puppy. Later, in March, we got the news we were getting a puppy that May! I was so happy and excited that April we would get to go see and pick out which puppy we wanted. We drove three hours, and it was so worth it. We picked out one out of many puppies. These were also Labrador puppies, but these were silver.

That May, my dad and I drove the three hours again to go and get our puppy. Our family decided to call him Duke. When we pulled up to the dog breeder's home, he and Duke were waiting outside for us. We thanked him, and my dad signed many papers for Duke. We loaded Duke up and went home.

When we got home, it was getting dark, and our family was so excited. Duke was so cute and energetic; he ran around and played with the toys we got him. He was already picking up on his name! A month went by, and I started realizing that puppies were a lot of work. I took him for walks every day after school and even when school stopped for summer. Duke had started nibbling more, and my brother and I had scratches all over our arms. That didn't end. He was starting to break his old toys and when we hit July, we were going crazy. Duke hadn't stopped nibbling me and my brother.

We kept working with him, and now, in March, a year later, he rarely nibbles, but he still has rage moments when he doesn't get his way. That is still a work in progress. Overall, I have learned that families have a right to have a pet, but it is a big responsibility, and if you want one, you need to know what could happen with a pet.

Poisoned Water

By Brennan Gerstbauer, Grade 2

North Elementary, St. Peter

In my house I usually say "water waster!" and I turn the sink off on my family members. They get very mad! I think water is critical. I think it's a beautiful source of a liquid that shouldn't be abused. We kids are 65% water in our bodies. We need it!

Five years ago, the water in Flint, Michigan was actually poisoned by lead. If they drank this water, their brain could lessen into nothing. LeeAnne Walters realized her kids weren't functioning well, and gathered it was because of the water. The government lied about the water quality. The people of Flint, Michigan had a right to the truth!

The people of Flint thought their government was responsible to provide clean water. They need to rely on scientists studying lead in water. Some scientists are in Cincinnati, where my grandparents live. Cincinnati had a device called coagulant that pulled the particles together that poisoned the water, so that the particles could be removed.

My mom asked me to watch a TV show called NOVA and I chose a video called "Poisoned Water" and I learned a ton of ways to prevent water from poisoning your family and town. My mom has been questioning me and asking me who taught me about wasting water. My reply is: my first-grade teacher. It is my responsibility to protect water.

Follow Me Today, For Tomorrow

By Sasha Jakovich, Grade 8

Dakota Meadows Middle School, Mankato

"We can't just continue living as if there was no tomorrow, because there is a tomorrow. That is all we are saying (Greta Thunburg)." The Earth is experiencing rising sea levels, receding glaciers and warming of oceans which directly harm animals and humans by destroying their habitats they live in. More frequent droughts, storms and heat waves are impacting them as well. Is it right to ruin the environment, or are we responsible to save it?

Animals have a right to live, just like us. Earth has already witnessed five mass extinctions. During "End Ordovician" (444 million years ago) the Earth lost 86% of its species. Then, 375 million years ago the Earth lost 75% of its species during "Lake Devonian." Life nearly ended on Earth during "End Permian" (251 million years ago). About

96% of all species were lost. Also, 200 million years ago 80% of species were lost during "End Triassic." Finally, 66 million years ago 76% of all species (mostly dinosaurs) were lost due to volcanic activity during "End Cretaceous." Will humans survive a sixth mass extinction?

Since the industrial revolution, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions have raised temperatures in the North and South Poles. Glaciers are rapidly melting, calving off into the sea and flooding lands destroying animal habitats on its way. Two hundred species go extinct every 24 hours. There are 8.7 million species and if 200 species go extinct every day, all the species will be gone before this generation's children have passed away. If we take immediate action, it will take the Earth approximately three million years to recover from all the species going extinct. That is about 379,000 lifetimes!

Humans also have many responsibilities towards the Earth. Forests are home to many of the world's most endangered wildlife. They also protect the planet by absorbing carbon dioxide (CO₂), a major source of pollution that causes climate change. To dramatically reduce global carbon emissions, cities should provide public transportation, manufacture electric cars, start using solar energy instead of combustible energy, and plant trees. Furthermore, all country leaders need to work directly with other countries to protect forests and benefit the livelihoods of local communities, use satellite images and aerial mapping technologies to track illegal logging, and study the vulnerability of forests to climate change and explore ways to help them adapt.

"The climate crisis has already been solved. We already have the facts and solutions. All we have to do is wake up and change" (Greta Thunburg). Are our rights blocking us from taking responsibilities? It may be easy for us to ignore this problem because we are focused on our life. Do we have a right to go on a vacation, play sports or hangout with friends and family while the planet is deteriorating? Is this responsible?

Greta Thunburg, an autistic 17 year old girl, is devoting herself to save the world. She is taking action. Greta started and I am following in her footsteps. That is my responsibility. As the definition of responsibility states, I can act independently and make decisions without authorization. I, 13 years old, am taking action. Follow me today, for tomorrow. Is it right to destroy the planet, or it is our responsibility to restore it?

"There is only one world we have got. We are standing at a crossroads in history. We are failing but we have not yet failed. There is still time to fix this. It is up to us" (Greta Thunburg).

State Story

By Sophia Matarrese, Grade 9

St. Peter High School, St. Peter

Seven months ago I was chosen to be on the A-team of the St. Peter Mock Trial team. I'm guessing you've never heard of Mock Trial, most people haven't. Anyway, my team got really good, and we made it to the State Championship.

After months of painstaking work, we were finally going to show off the progress we'd made! I was preparing like crazy. I had spent almost every night after school going over my notes. I would even read the affidavits in class. It felt like my whole life revolved around rehearsing for the state competition.

Finally, March 5 came. The most nervous and excited I had ever been was on this day, and I have quite a crazy story to tell.

We arrive at our hotel, and everyone is moving fast, getting checked in, reading over their notes. Then, BAM! Two hours go by and it's time to go to trial! My nervous energy is presenting itself in the form of intense nausea, and by the time we're going through security at the courthouse I'm holding back vomit. It doesn't help that we have to ride fifteen floors up on a tiny elevator. I've always hated elevators, and I get motion sick in them.

I can't feel my limbs. I'm so, so scared for my team. Some of the people on my team are seniors, and this is their last chance! I don't want to disappoint my team.

We spend two incredibly tense hours in court that afternoon. As I'm watching my team I don't realize I'm holding my breath. My role in the first trial is to timekeep. It's like watching fish from outside of the fishbowl. I'm not allowed to communicate with them. They're removed from the rest of the world, in their element.

When the trial is over, I feel optimistic. Some of my nervous energy is gone, but I have a killer stress headache forming, and my nausea has only gotten worse. At least I'm feeling good about our chances. My team has gotten some of our confidence back. I can feel the lifted mood like someone has opened a window and all of a sudden everything is so much brighter.

I'm feeling so hopeful that I think, maybe we can go to Nationals! It sounds like a crazy thought, but then again, these people are the most hardworking, quick witted people I have ever met.

We step into that same elevator and start to go down. We have a 30-minute break to eat dinner, and then it's back at it. Our next trial is supposed to start late, around 7 p.m. This time, I have an active role to play. For this trial, I'm a witness.

As we're riding down the elevator I have a crazy thought. What if our elevator got stuck? I tell myself to stop thinking like that. Adrenaline is pumping through my body like I've been pounding shots of it. I can feel my fingers and toes tingling. I feel like I'm floating.

We reach the ground floor, and there's a slight bump, and then stillness. A feeling of dread is spreading through me like a drop of black ink in a bowl of clear water. The elevator is silent. Everyone holds their breath, waiting for the doors to open. They're not opening. I'm starting to panic. I've never been stuck in an elevator before!

Soon enough one of the coaches is using the communication system in the elevator, and she tells the man on the other end that we're stuck. I start to realize how bad this situation is. There are more than fifteen people in a tiny elevator and we're all wearing big, hot suits because that's the normal attire for Mock Trial.

The man on the other end tells her to call 911. She does, and they tell us they're 40 minutes away. Forty minutes!? What am I supposed to do for 40 minutes? We're going to miss our next trial, and this is the state competition!

I try to keep a level head. It's okay, I tell myself. The coaches are telling us kids that it's going to be fine. I try to stay calm, but I can't quite fight the images of us starved and passed out after being stuck in here for hours. I can feel the tears starting to build. No, no, no! I can't cry! I hate crying, and I don't want to be emotional during the next trial. You're going to have to hold it together, I tell myself. I lean against the wall, trying not to cry.

5 minutes.

10 minutes.

15 minutes.

20 minutes.

Suddenly, we hear people outside the door! Hope! There are firefighters trying to open the doors. The courthouse must have called the fire department, and now we're going to be saved!

25 minutes.

I slide onto the floor. There's already another person sitting down. It's really hot and

uncomfortable. It's cooler closer to the ground. I curl up into a ball and make myself as small as possible as to give the others more space.

30 minutes.

The man on the other side calls us to tell us that the fire department can't get the doors open.

35 minutes.

I look across the elevator and see Katie, the daughter of one of the coaches, crying.

She's the youngest person on this elevator, besides me. I can't take it anymore. I lose it, and tears start silently rolling down my face. How embarrassing! Once I start crying, the tears don't stop.

40 minutes.

Somebody notices I'm crying and tries to comfort me. It only makes me cry harder, but I appreciate the gesture.

45 minutes.

50 minutes.

Without warning, the doors open. I'm swept out of the elevator, and on the other side is a bunch of firefighters, policemen and workers from the courthouse. I make eye contact with one of the firefighters and he looks at me in concern. Then I realize how bad I must look with my red eyes and tearstained, blotchy cheeks.

I thought I would feel relief, and while it's colder out here, in the courthouse, I'm still shaking and crying. We turn the corner and every single Mock Trial team is there, waiting for us. People are coming up to me, hugging me, offering me water and food. I'm overwhelmed, and eventually I'm led over to a table. Everyone is making plans for the trial, but I'm not getting any better. The tears keep coming.

Finally, someone notices me and asks if I'm alright. I don't speak because I know if I do my voice will waver and shake. My coach comes over to me and asks if I can do the next trial. Everyone is staring at me, and it crushes me to tell her no.

She nods, and then brings me outside for some air. We're walking past people who stare at me and I duck my head. Then, she stops me.

"Do you want to be a lawyer when you grow up?" she asks me. I tell her yes, I want to be many things. "Well you can't do this. Lawyers have to go to their trials, no matter what," she says, and looks me straight in the eye.

As quickly as I had said no to the trial, I heard the words coming out of my mouth. "Okay. Okay. Let's go." I try not to think. I just say the words. My coach smiles at me and we walk up the staircase after I tell her no more elevators.

We make it to the trial, luckily it's on a lower floor than the last one. Everyone is surprised to see me. I tell them I'm doing the trial, and while they're concerned, they're also happy.

The trial begins, and by this time it's almost 8 p.m. I walk over to my spot and sit down. You don't need to know much about a trial to know that crying witnesses are not ideal. I try to suck it up, because witnesses are professional. We go through the motions, and I have to say my name. I stand up and say my character, and my voice doesn't shake! I don't sound particularly strong, but I don't sound like I've been crying either.

I'm examined last, so that's good. When they finally get to me I've pulled it together and I do my part well. Later, after the trial, my coaches tell me they thought I looked horrible with my red eyes, but when I started talking in a chipper voice and smiling, they knew I was going to be okay. I have to admit, it was kind of funny looking around and seeing everyone's surprised faces. I even made a joke on the stand, which doesn't happen very often, but audiences love it.

The trial ended at 10:30 at night. I didn't even feel tired. Later that night we all gathered in a hotel room. It was almost midnight, and we had to get up at 6 a.m. the next morning. I was exhausted, too nauseous to eat, dealing with a mind numbing headache, and running on some crackers I had that morning. I was also extremely content, because in the end I knew I had made the right choice. I didn't let my team down. I knew that I had a responsibility to my friends and also to myself to compete in that trial, and I did.

That night I was miserable, but I knew I would make the same choices a hundred times over.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ava Boswell is a great student. She is also very caring and thoughtful of others. Ava has a great personality and loves to joke around.

Brielle Brown is a dog-lover who wants to be an author and a fifth-grade teacher when she grows up. She loves ripe raspberry chocolate chunk ice cream and her favorite place to be is underwater – swimming! Brielle enjoys hunting and fishing with her dad, reading and writing with her mom, and being outside with her sisters. She believes that all kids have it in them to be awesome writers and readers! (And be good at math and science, too!)

Scarlett Chance has been writing and drawing since the day she discovered her first pencil. She can often be found at her desk listening to music while drafting her next master piece. Scarlett's most valued trophies are colorful sets of markers, pencils, crayons and journals. She has boxes of unfinished stories and pictures that may someday find their way into a finished product.

Norah Davis loves animals, reading and swimming. She also enjoys baking and archery. Nora's favorite quote to live by is the French proverb, "Wherever life plants you, bloom with grace."

Sofia Fritzke is an active 12-year-old girl who loves animals, art and hanging out with friends. When she is not writing, she is playing sports like softball and volleyball. Sofie also enjoys water skiing, bike riding and rollerblading. She also likes to bake in her free time. Sofie spends a lot of time with her naughty 95-pound puppy.

Autumn Gaul is a cat lover. She loves to dance, sing and play the violin. Autumn enjoys entertaining her family with little stories and song lyrics that she's written.

Brennan Gerstbauer is a second-grader at North Elementary in Saint Peter. He loves to read (lately Harry Potter), build with LEGOS, eat mustard, and play soccer and baseball. Brennan learned to use a thesaurus to write his essay. He truly does guard the water faucet!

Brennan Glawe, the youngest of four children, was always 'busy' playing as a child, earning the nickname 'BumbleBee'. He attends Cathedral High School in New Ulm where he is active in sports and student council. Brennan lives with his mom on the Farm at Grey Havens located along the bluffs of the Minnesota River Valley, nestled between the Old Fort Road and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Highway. When not writing short stories, he plays violin in the Allegro Strings and the Mankato Area Youth Symphony. Brennan likes to read, ride minibike, play Farming Simulator and compete in science fairs.

Ethan Gordon was inspired to write his story because he enjoys fantasy stories about a hero's journey. He also enjoys reading fantasy or sci-fi books and playing video games, as well as looking at the night sky. Ethan enjoys reading at school and would like to study coding or engineering when he is older.

Olivia Graddy loves writing stories and poems. She also likes creating other types of art including photography and sketches. Olivia is an avid reader as well!

Lulu Gray is fourteen and an eighth-grade hockey player at Shattuck-St. Mary's in Faribault. She was born in New York City, but grew up in Cos Cob, Connecticut. Lulu has had an affinity for writing since first grade.

Riley Holets has a vivid imagination and because her art skills are abysmal, she creates things through writing.

Andree Jakovich is in second grade at Hoover Elementary in Mankato. She enjoys writing amongst other things.

Sasha Jakovich is in eighth grade at Dakota Meadows Middle School in Mankato. She enjoys writing amongst other things.

Cameron Johnson loves sports and playing baseball, basketball and football. He also enjoys playing video games and hanging out with friends. Cameron learned to read at the age of three. Cameron is very caring, helps where he can, is a leader and a big brother. When he was five he once answered a wheel of fortune puzzle with no letters up on the board. The answer was Buzz Lightyear.

Evie Johnson is nine years old. She is in fourth grade at Kennedy Elementary school in Mankato. Evie loves dogs! She fosters them until they get adopted. Her favorite color is lavender and she loves to eat noodles! One of Evie's dreams was to write a story and get it published. She loves writing stories!

Katrin Loftin is a bright, outgoing third grader who loves art, reading and writing. Her writing is inspired by art and the world around her.

Sophia Matarrese is a ninth-grader at St. Peter High School. She has been writing ever since she was able to. Sophie also enjoys reading, playing tennis and gardening.

Keisha Navarrete realizes that people all over the world don't have homes and shelter so she hoped her story would inspire people to help each other.

Leah Proehl's favorite genre is sci-fi or fantasy, though she also enjoys horror. Aside from writing Leah also plays oboe, tennis and is in various art classes.

Claire Roering is 11 years old. She loves to write. Claire also likes to spend time with her family and her two dogs, Lucky and Lolly.

Andie Sanderson is a 13-year-old who likes to read and be outside with her family in her spare time.

Peyton Seeger likes to read realistic fiction, graphic novels and Harry Potter. She was inspired by the book "Smile," by Raina Telgemeier, when she wrote her realistic fiction story. Peyton likes to play ice hockey all year round, and in the summer she also plays soccer and go swimming. Her favorite parts of school are going to the library and being with Mrs. Brownlow, her enrichment teacher. Peyton also likes to have time with the media teacher, Mrs. Seeger (her mom). She also likes math. Peyton wants to be a lawyer when she is older.

Nityan Sharma loves to listen to stories and ask the question, "Why?" He enjoys reading and being read to, and finds numbers and number games very interesting. Nityan loves playing outdoors in summer and if possible in winter as well! Currently he is keeping a close watch on the seedlings he has planted this summer with his Grandma!

Rohan Sharma is a ten-year-old who loves to read, read, read, and tell tall tales! He sometimes pens down his thoughts in a creative and imaginative way. Rohan is always up for debating any subject. He loves watching films based on books he has read and then discussing and critiquing them.

Nora Smith's inspiration to write her story was because not all people in the world get to go to school and not all people know that. She wanted her story to be able to tell other people who read it that not everyone's lives are perfect. In Nora's free time she like to play softball, play the piano and read a lot. Her favorite parts of school are reading and writing because during reading she can just get lost in a book and travel to a whole new world. She likes writing because she can write about whatever she wants! Well, most of the time. When Nora is older, she wants to study radiology because she wants to be able to help people who are sick know what is wrong with them, whether it is cancer or a heart disease. She mostly likes to read fantasy books but sometimes reads non-fiction or mystery. Nora never reads scary stories though.

Reagan Steffen is a fourth-grader at Tri-City United in Le Center. She enjoys reading books and writing, as well as basketball, swimming, and spending time with family and friends.

Olivia Trotman was inspired to write her story because at first it was hard to think of what to write. Then she thought that she has to do homework and clean for her responsibilities. Olivia thought of something on TV she saw where they did a program to help people. Nothing like she did in her story, but she thought it would be a good idea to use. In addition to writing, Olivia likes reading (especially comics and realistic fiction), art, and playing with her friends and neighbors. Her favorite parts of school are art, reading and when they write for 10 minutes each day. Olivia doesn't know what she wants to study yet but she really wants to be a professional gymnast.

Sophia Williams enjoys dancing, singing, composing music and writing. She also loves to read and create art. Sophia hopes to be a *New York Times* bestselling author someday.

Anna Woods is 15 years old. She uses poetry as a form of relaxation and hopes to turn it into a career one day.



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