

It rained all day long. The wind and rain knocked the remaining leaves to the ground where they were swept into the street. Today was a typical fall day.

Just two days ago, the sun was out and the temperatures were very pleasant. Raking leaves into large playful piles was very relaxing.

The family worked together gathering the maple leaves into piles. Kids will be kids, and they loved jumping and hiding in the leaves. Even their dog liked to romp around in the leaves. It was fun for everyone.

The next day, the weather changed slightly. Clouds began to roll into the area and darken the sky. It did not rain then, but it was clear that winter was near. The family thought that the ground would be covered in no time. Winter was approaching fast.

They awoke to the rain hitting the roof of their home. It was a light rain, so they figured it would rain all day. They were right. Now the kids would not be able to play in the leaves. The leaves were all wet and brown. They were no longer dry and colorful.

The winds picked up speed and sent the piles of leaves blowing across the yard and into the street. The kids thought they were pretty lucky to have been able to play in the leaves yesterday.

Later in the day, the street sweeper came into their neighborhood and, with its mighty vacuum, gobbled up the leaves that had found their way into the street. The leaves were gone.

That night the kids were tucked into bed for the evening. As they slept, the rain turned to snow.

The kids dreamed of sledding and snowmen. The next morning their dreams came true. Snow!

Billy was sitting on the sidewalk curb holding his favorite old baseball glove.

"Hey, Billy!" he heard. "Weren't you supposed to meet me half an hour ago at the park? Why are you sitting here instead of moving?"

"I'm waiting," Billy replied.

"Waiting for what?" I asked.

"I'm waiting for Mr. Sanchez to leave for work. It shouldn't be much longer."

"Billy, your Mom said it was all right for you to play ball with me at the park. I don't understand why you're waiting for Mr. Sanchez."

Billy sighed as he explained, "Well, Mr. Sanchez's car is parked in the driveway, right across the street. See? And the park is across the street and down the block."

I shook my head because I didn't understand what Billy was talking about. This morning he was excited about playing baseball with the guys. He was a pretty good shortstop, even though he wasn't quite five years old.

"I know where the park is and so do you. So explain to me again why you are sitting here?"

"I already told you. I'm waiting for Mr. Sanchez," replied Billy. I looked across the street. There was no sign of Mr. Sanchez coming out of his house.

"Mom said I can't cross the street if I see any cars," Billy continued, "and I see Mr. Sanchez's car. It's right there in his driveway!"

"Oh, Billy!" I laughed. "I'm sure your mom meant you should not cross the street if you see any cars driving on the road! She just wants to make sure that a moving car doesn't hit you. She's not worried about the parked cars! Come on. You can walk with me to the park!"

"Oh, Sam. You're so smart. Thanks for being my friend. Let's go play ball."

Mama frog carried her babies upon her back. They rode there as she swam in the water and hopped along the edge of the creek. In fact, the only time they jumped off her back was when Mama frog caught them something to eat.

Those baby frogs just loved to eat black bugs. Green flies, though, were their favorites. "Mama, Mama," they would holler from her back. "Please catch us something to eat. We are very hungry. Growing babies need lots of insects to get big and strong."

"That's true, but I am very tired," said the mama frog. "I have been carrying you around all day. I must rest now."

Mama frog swam beneath a lily pad and closed her eyes. She tried to sleep, but she couldn't because her baby frogs continued hopping around on the lily pad above.

"Will you three settle down?" the mama frog demanded of her babies. "Your mama is very tired."

"Okay, Mama," the baby frogs said. "We'll be quiet."

Just then, one of the baby frogs saw a green fly buzz by. It zoomed low over the water and right by their eyes. That was too tempting for them to ignore.

"I'm going to catch that green fly," one of the baby frogs told his brother and sister. "Since Mama is going to take a nap, I'll catch our lunch. Someone has to take care of us!"

The baby frog waited for the green fly to buzz over again, and then she jumped with all her might and opened her tiny mouth. The green fly flew right in.

The mama frog watched. "My babies are growing up," she said. "Maybe it is best if I just relax. They are doing well by themselves."

Ray Barns loves socks. He loves socks so much he wears five pairs of socks a day. People know and love him as the boy with the socks. They think it's unusual, but they enjoy it. However, Ray's father is always complaining about it.

"Two feet. Five pairs of socks. Ten socks a day!" he can be heard saying as Ray huffs up and down the stairs of the house. Every day there is a pile of socks for him to wash. "When will he stop? When will my boy start acting normally?"

Every morning, Ray pulls on his socks in rainbow color order. He starts with a strawberry red pair pulled up to his knees. Then he pulls on a lemon yellow pair, a lime green pair, and a blueberry blue pair. Finally, he pulls on a pair of purple ankle socks.

In the winter, Ray has to cover those fantastic socks with boring pants. Too bad for Ray. In the summer, Ray gets to show off his socks, but he also nearly melts from the heat. He's happy though, because wearing colorful socks is more important to him than comfort.

Ray's father tries to talk him out of all those socks. "I bought you a pair of sandals," he tells him one summer day. "Trust me. Once you put on these sandals, you'll never want to take them off."

Ray knows his father loves him, so Ray sits down and starts pulling off his socks. Finally all five pairs are bundled neatly in the middle of the kitchen table, and Ray is wriggling his bare toes in his new sandals. He realizes the sandals look great. He realizes the sandals feel really good.

Ray's father is right. From this day forward, Ray will insist on wearing sandals. He'll wear them right over his five pairs of socks.

I love to read. When I read, I can travel to distant places. I can be different people, and I can do amazing things I would never have imagined doing.

Last month, I read a book that took me to a country in Europe. I climbed mountains in Switzerland. I wore a backpack and special climbing gear. I was one of the strongest and bravest people there. I rescued a small boy who was lost in a forest!

Last week, I read a book about a nine-year-old boy who lives in Mexico. While I read, I almost felt like I was that boy. I went to his school and celebrated his holidays. The climate where he lives is much different from mine. It is warm there all year, and he has never seen snow! I was glad to be myself again after I was done reading.

Yesterday, a new book brought me to a warm, tropical island in the Pacific. I swam in the warm, salty water. Later, I dove to catch my lunch of lobster and fish. While diving, I discovered a long-lost treasure! It was left from the days when pirates sailed the seas. That was fun and a bit spooky.

Today, I am reading another book where I am deep in a tropical forest along the Amazon River. The boat we are traveling in has just crashed into a big rock, and water is leaking in! Even though I know it's just a book, I feel scared and hope we can fix the leak or reach the river's edge before ending up in deep water. I can't wait to finish this book! I'll have to read a relaxing one next time.

"Where are you going, Dad?" I asked excitedly. I wonder if something interesting is happening.

"I'm going to search for some deer. Would you like to come along? We'll take a trek in the woods," replies Dad.

"I love going for walks. Wait for me!" I reply.

"I want to go too!" yells Mike, my younger brother. "Please help me tie my shoes!"

"Don't worry, Mike. I will help you. Dad always waits for both of us," I explain calmly.

We live in the country with huge trees behind our house. During the different seasons of the year, my brother and I like to walk along the paths that go through the trees. Dad usually goes with us and teaches us things about nature.

It's a fall afternoon and our shuffling feet make quite a racket through the dry leaves. Dad tells us to try to be quiet. He doesn't want us to scare the deer away.

"Shhhh!" says Dad. "Stop and listen!"

My little brother and I stop, but we don't hear anything.

"I hear something!" whispers Mike. "Over there!" he points.

I look to where he's pointing and see a big, brown deer looking right at us! She isn't moving, but her head is up high. She's listening just like we are! The deer puts her head down, grunts, and stomps her front hoofs on the ground. We wait while Dad smiles and lifts his camera to his face. Click! Click! Dad takes two pictures.

Two smaller deer stand behind the doe! They are her baby fawns, born last spring. They are eating acorns off the ground. The fawns don't even see us! The doe snorts again and turns to jump away. The two little deer follow her.

"That was really cool, Dad. Thanks for taking us with you," we say.

Tina was always telling her friends about her Uncle Jack.

"My Uncle Jack," she would say, "is really famous. He can fly his own plane, and he can ride wild horses. He's over six feet tall, and he wears a cowboy hat made out of alligator skin."

"Why does he wear a cowboy hat made out of alligator skin?" Tina's friend, Ashley, asked her one day. "What's so special about that?"

"Well, my Uncle Jack wrestles alligators," said Tina. "That's how he got the hat."

The children in Tina's class grew sick and tired of her bragging about her Uncle Jack all the time. No one really believed Tina's stories about her Uncle Jack. All the kids thought Tina was lying. They started to pick on Tina. They started to call her mean names.

"Lizard breath!" Ashley called Tina one day. "I bet you've got lizard breath because you've been kissing alligators!"

Everyone laughed at Ashley's words. Tina couldn't believe it. She thought those kids were her friends.

One afternoon, Ashley was teasing Tina as usual when there was a knock on the classroom door. When the teacher answered it, all the kids gasped as the teacher stepped aside.

A man walked into the room. He was over six feet tall, and he wore a cowboy hat. He had big hands, green eyes, and a huge plastic alligator slung over his shoulder.

"Hello mates," he said. "I'm looking for my niece, Tina."

Tina jumped out of her seat. She was so excited to see her Uncle Jack that she gave him a hug in front of everyone.

"Tina," the teacher said, "would you please introduce us to your guest?"

"This is my Uncle Jack," Tina said with a smile. "He's come here today to show us how to wrestle alligators."

The peacock thought he was the most beautiful of all birds. Each morning, he would wake up and fan his feathers in the rising sun. At noon he would count his feathers as he ate his seeds. At dusk he would fold up his feathers and go to sleep.

The peacock didn't talk to any of the other birds. He thought he was too beautiful. He spoke only to his reflection in the silver stream near his nest. The peacock always stood at the edge of the stream and stared down at his marvelous self.

"You are so fine," he would boast to his reflection.

"Why, thank you VERY much," he would reply to his reflection. "I just had my feathers groomed yesterday. I'm glad you approve."

There was a birch tree near the silver stream. In the tree lived a tough mama squirrel and her family. One day the mama squirrel got sick of listening to the peacock talking to himself. While her children napped, she snuck down to the edge of the stream and hid in the cattails. The peacock came for a sip of water and to admire his beak.

"You are so lovely," he said to himself.

"You are also quite lazy," said a voice coming from the bushes.

"What?" he gasped. "Who's there?"

"No one but you," said the voice. "What you need to do is get to work. You can't walk around admiring yourself all day and ignore everything else. Winter is coming, my peacock friend. You need to prepare for it."

The peacock had been so stuck on himself that he'd never even thought about winter. After that day, the peacock stopped staring at himself. Instead he stored away food and got ready for winter. Because of the mama squirrel's advice, the peacock lived to enjoy another summer.

Once there was a little bumblebee named Buzz. He would zip through the air going this way and that way. He loved to fly around looking for pretty flowers to smell.

Red roses were very nice to smell. Buzz would sometimes see his bumblebee friends when stopping by his favorite rose bush. Every bee seemed to like roses.

Buzz liked his friends, but sometimes he wished he could be alone. "It would be great if I could find a flower that was just for me," Buzz quietly thought to himself. Buzz decided right then and there to find just such a flower.

First, he smelled the daisies that grew along the old farmer's road.

"Wow! These daisies smell pretty good, but I will keep looking. I bet my bee buddies already know about these daisies," he said.

From the roadside daisies, he spied a grove of lilac bushes. They sure were fragrant. Buzz raced over to them to get a closer look. When he arrived at the lavender flowers, he saw that his brother Buzzter was already there.

"Nice smelling flowers," Buzzter said to his younger brother.

"I have to agree with you," Buzz said. "These lilacs sure do smell good." Buzz hovered around his brother Buzzter and said, "I will see you at the hive later. I am off to find a flower that is just for me."

With that, Buzz flew off. He went over the trees and under the bushes in hopes that he would find the perfect flower. He almost turned around to head back to the hive, when he smelled a wondrous scent. Buzz spotted a white and pink flower growing next to the old farmer's barn. The flower was beautiful and smelled terrific. At last, he had found a flower that was just for him.

Three-year-old Jordan lived with her mother and father in a blue house. Jordan's mother was round and jolly. She was always smiling. Her father was tall and strong. He had blue eyes that twinkled.

Jordan's grandmother was very old and sick. Today the family was going to visit her in a place they called "the Home." Jordan knew what a home was. She loved her own home, especially her bedroom. It was a yellow color, and all of her toys were there.

The building her father drove up to didn't look like any home Jordan had ever seen. It was a big brown building. "Is this Nana's house?" she asked.

"Yes, dear," her mother answered. "Nana has to live here so the nurses can take care of her."

They walked through the heavy glass doors and into a large room with a white floor. There were many people who had wheelchairs. Jordan was frightened and clung to her mother's hand. She could feel all the people watching her as they walked down the hallway.

When they reached the farthest door, Jordan's father knocked. Then he opened the door, and they went inside. Jordan's father lifted her up to look at Nana. She was lying there quietly on the bed. She had blue eyes just like Jordan's father. "Hi, Nana," said Jordan.

"Nana can't hear very well anymore," her mother said. Jordan squirmed down to the floor and looked around. She saw a white stuffed bunny on a shelf on top of some magazines. She pulled it out.

Jordan walked over to the bed, and her father picked her up again. She laid the bunny on Nana's chest and put both of Nana's hands on it. Her grandmother looked up at her and smiled. Jordan was no longer frightened.

Even though Marcus and Beth were twins, they were very different people. Beth liked exciting things. At the fair, she liked to ride on the fastest roller coaster. When she visited the ice cream shop, she chose a new flavor each time. Marcus liked things that didn't change much. At the fair, he rode the Ferris wheel around and around slowly. When he visited the ice cream shop, he always chose chocolate.

Mother told the twins they would soon have a new baby brother or sister. Beth wanted to name the baby after a superhero. Marcus thought "Marcus" was a nice name.

When Mother came home with the new baby, Beth wore a party hat and blew a loud horn. Marcus just held a sign saying, "Welcome."

First Beth held the new baby. She sang the baby a song about horses and ducklings. She put shiny purple and orange tap shoes on the baby's feet. She tried to make the baby laugh. Beth made faces and told jokes, but the baby just slept.

Then Marcus held the new baby. He whispered a slow song in the baby's ear. He repeated the names of all the rocks he knew. He tickled the baby's little feet. Marcus showed the baby his favorite stamp collection. He read the baby a story about reptiles, but the baby just slept.

One day Mother asked, "I wonder if the baby will be like Marcus or like Beth?"

Marcus said, "I want the baby to be just like me!"

Beth shouted, "I want the baby to be just like me!"

Suddenly the baby woke up and began to cry harder and harder.

Mother said, "I think the baby is saying he doesn't want to be like Marcus or like Beth. I think the baby wants to be like himself!"

Ted loved going for walks with his grandpa. When they walked together, they would search for pretty rocks. Ted's grandpa was an expert at finding the prettiest rocks. He usually spotted them before Ted did. He'd smile at Ted as he held a rock up to the sun.

"What a beauty," he would say. Then he would slip the rock into his pocket. When they returned from their walk, they would each place the rocks they found in separate jars. Ted's grandpa's jar was nearly filled to the top. Ted's jar was closer to empty.

"Don't worry, Teddy," his grandpa would say. "Someday you'll develop the knack for finding rocks. Practice makes perfect, and that's why we walk together every day."

One day Ted's grandpa arrived home with a surprise. It was a special machine that polished rocks.

"See," the old man explained, "you put the rocks in here. Then you wait for the machine to tumble them. In a few days, you have beautiful rocks. Let's polish some of our own, shall we? We'll each do five."

Ted picked out five of his biggest and prettiest rocks. His grandpa did the same. They put the rocks in the machine and waited three days. When the time was up, Ted pulled off the cover and dumped out the rocks.

"Wow!" he exclaimed.

The rocks were beautiful. They were polished and smooth and warm to the touch. They were also much brighter and more colorful now. Ted studied one and saw his own reflection.

"I may have a lot of rocks," his grandpa told him, "but you have some real beauties."

Ted brought his polished rocks home and set them on his bookshelf. He couldn't wait to go out and look for more.

The sun was out, and not a cloud was in the sky. Scott, or Scooter, as his close friends liked to call him, thought today was a perfect day to go fishing at Old Bass Lake.

Scooter climbed out of bed and quickly put on his lucky fishing shirt and the rest of his clothes. He raced down the stairs of his house. Scooter came to a screeching stop on the hardwood kitchen floor. He nearly slid into his mom, almost like he was stealing second base.

"Mom, can I go fishing down at Old Bass?" he asked excitedly.

"Are you going to fish with anyone?" she asked her son.

"Nope, just me, my pole, and my tackle box," he replied.

"Well, I think you should take your sister along."

"Aww! Mom! Do I have to? I always have to take her fish off the hook, and she always wants to go home early," he complained.

"Scott Matthew Johnson, you will take your sister along. That is final!" He knew she meant business since she usually called him Scooter. "OK, I'll take her," he said, turning toward the garage where his trusty fishing pole was located.

He walked down the hallway and opened the door to the garage. As the garage door opened, he saw the beautiful day he had seen earlier from his bedroom window.

Scooter quietly thought to himself about the lunker he was going to catch. He grabbed his pole and started down the driveway.

He had nearly reached the end of the driveway when he heard his mother yell, "Forget something?" Pole. Tackle box. Nope, I've got it all, he thought, as he glanced up the driveway and saw his younger sister skipping toward him with her red fishing pole in hand.

Albert was a goldfish in a bowl. He ate a breakfast of green and brown flakes each morning. Then he watched the children go off to school.

Albert hated being stuck in his bowl because he could only swim around in circles. He'd rather go to school. Poor Albert couldn't even read a book. The pages would get soaked!

Albert was quite a smart fish. He could do flips under water. He could spell his name in the pebbles on the bottom of his bowl. No matter how brilliant Albert was though, he still had a problem. Only the cat spoke to him. And the cat was not particularly nice to him.

"I'll eat you up one day," the cat would tell Albert when they were all alone in the house. "I'll gobble you right up. You will be surprised to discover that no one will miss you."

It seemed to Albert that everyone loved the cat. No one seemed to notice the cat was mean. No one seemed to care that the cat hated books and wasn't smart. The cat couldn't even spell his own name, but the children played with him every day.

One day the cat dipped his paw in Albert's fishbowl. To save himself, Albert swam to the very bottom of his fishbowl. He hid behind some rocks. When the children came home from school that day, they saw the cat was wet. They didn't see Albert hiding behind the rocks in the bottom of his fishbowl, and that scared them.

"You are a very naughty cat!" they shouted.

Finally one of the children found Albert hiding in the bottom of the bowl. "I found him! I found our wonderful fish!" Albert felt happy that his family loved him after all.

Now the cat is kept in a separate room during the school day, and the children read books to Albert every night.

Mr. Green had the very special job of painting houses. He would paint a house of any size, and he would paint it any color the owner wanted. In fact, he especially liked helping the owners choose just the right color.

One day, Mrs. Plum called Mr. Green. "I would like you to paint my tiny house purple," she said. "Do you think you could paint the trim around the windows an even darker purple?"

"I can do that for you," he told her. "It sounds lovely. I'll have the job done by Tuesday."

On Tuesday, Mr. Green finished painting Mrs. Plum's house. When she saw it, she was delighted.

"You do wonderful work, Mr. Green," she exclaimed. "I'll tell everyone I know."

The next day, Mrs. Plum called her cousin, Betty Blue, and told her all about the wonderful job Mr. Green had done painting her house. Mrs. Plum knew Betty Blue had a paint job of her own in mind.

Betty Blue asked Mr. Green to paint her cabin. She knew she wanted white trim around her windows, but she couldn't decide what color to paint the cabin. Mr. Green suggested sky blue. After a week, Mr. Green was finished with Betty Blue's cabin. "I love it," Betty Blue told Mr. Green when she saw her cabin. "That's exactly the color I wanted, Mr. Green. It's perfect."

That night, Betty Blue spoke to her sister, Rose. She told Rose what a great job Mr. Green had done painting her cabin. The next morning Rose stopped by Mr. Green's gray house and asked him if he could paint her house.

"You bet I can," Mr. Green told her with a grin. "Let me guess. You would like me to paint your house ruby red."

Roger wasn't much of an athlete. It wasn't that he didn't like sports. He really did like basketball. But he was better at tripping and crashing into things than he was at making baskets. His classmates seldom asked him to play on a team when they played basketball at noon. Mr. Park never chose him to shoot baskets in front of the gym class. Mr. Park always picked Tom, a boy in Roger's class, to show the gym class how to make the perfect basket.

It seemed to Roger that Tom never missed a shot. Tom was so quick and so skilled. He was the best basketball player in the fourth grade.

"I want to make every basket like Tom does," Roger told his best friend, Sam, one afternoon when they were walking home from school. "I want to be Mr. Park's favorite student."

As they walked, the two boys passed Tom's driveway. Tom was already home from school. He was shooting baskets in the basketball hoop set up in front of his garage. As Roger and Sam watched, Tom missed two baskets and made five.

"See," Roger said. "Tom is such a good ball player."

"Why do you think he's so good?" Sam asked Roger. "Do you think he's so good because he practices all the time? All you do when you get home is complain that you're no good at sports. Then you sit in front of the TV all night."

Sam was right. Roger did sit in front of the television most nights. "Yeah, but I'm not going to do that anymore," Roger told Sam. "I'm going to practice, practice, practice. Do you want to join me?"

Sam shook his head and showed Roger the trumpet case he was carrying.

"Nope, I already decided that I'm going to be the best trumpet player in the fourth grade. That means I have to go home and practice."

Troy sat on his new bike with both feet planted on the ground. He held the handlebars firmly and took a deep breath. "I can do it," Troy told himself. Then he slowly put one foot on a pedal. This was Troy's first time on a bike without training wheels. He wasn't quite sure how to start riding.

At first, Troy tried pushing himself along with one foot. Every time he tried putting both feet on the pedals, he lost his balance. The bike wheels would start to wobble. That scared Troy. He didn't want to fall down.

Troy's older sister was watching. She saw the problem he was having and wanted to help. "I'll hold the bike for you," she offered.

"No, thanks," said Troy. "I want to learn by myself."

Troy was getting frustrated. It seemed like everyone else could ride a bike. "I should have learned to ride without training wheels years ago," Troy thought. "Maybe it would have been easier then."

Troy didn't know what to try next. "I'm so mad!" he yelled as he launched himself forward. Suddenly, Troy found his balance and glided without falling. He stopped and tried the same movement again. "I did it!" a surprised Troy said.

"You sure did!" his sister agreed. She was grinning and jumping up and down. She may have been even more excited than Troy. "You did it with no help from anyone. For weeks, Dad had to run beside me hanging on so I wouldn't fall."

"You'll always be my little brother," Troy's sister said. "That will never change, even when you're eighty. But you're not a real little kid anymore. You can ride a bike!" Troy didn't think he had ever felt so proud of himself.

Mama Duck wanted a new sofa for her nest because her old one was lumpy and full of holes and because her baby ducks sat on the old one. Those ducklings took up too much room. Things had to change!

"We need a new sofa," Mama Duck announced to Papa Duck. "The old sofa is falling apart. Its lovely red spots have worn off. We're buying a new sofa and that is that."

On Tuesday, Mama Duck went sofa shopping. One sofa had attractive purple swirls but was too tiny. Another one had pretty yellow stripes but was too large. One sofa, with pink diamonds and purple flowers, was just too ugly.

She found a golden sofa that she loved. It was too expensive though. She knew Papa Duck would get upset if she bought that sofa. Mama and Papa Duck had some money, but they had seven baby ducks to take care of. Mama Duck had to watch every penny she spent.

Mama Duck sat on a sofa made out of velvet.

"Oh, this sofa is comfy," she said to herself. Then she looked at the price tag. "I have enough money for this sofa." She felt lucky to find something that was beautiful, comfortable, and affordable. Mama Duck paid the sales duck and went home happy.

That night, Mama and Papa Duck sat on the new sofa. The baby ducks sat on the old sofa. Papa Duck picked up a book and started to read quietly. Mama Duck picked up her sewing and started to sew peacefully. The baby ducks fell asleep with plenty of room to dream and grow. Everyone was happy.

Bat lived all by himself in a damp and musty cave. The cave was always dark and dreary. As Bat hung upside down day after day, he thought about his sorrows.

"If only I had a friend," Bat often thought. "If I had a friend, I would have someone to play with. If I had a friend to talk to, I think I'd finally be very happy."

At night Bat would spread his strong wings and fly from the cave. He would search for a nice apple tree. Then he would perch on a branch and gobble down a juicy dinner. Bat liked apples, and he loved plums. But his favorite meals were those of beetles and other bugs.

To catch bugs, Bat had to swoop through the air with his mouth open. One night Bat was swooping through the air when he bumped into something solid and furry. Bat fell to the ground. He was scared as he looked up and stared into the yellow eyes of a cat.

"Oh, please don't eat me!" Bat cried as he covered his tiny head.

"I don't plan on eating you," said the cat. "Don't have a heart attack."

"Why wouldn't you?" Bat asked as he looked into the cat's yellow eyes.

The cat yawned. "My owners feed me plenty of cat food so I don't have to hunt. To be honest, I'm bored most of the time."

"Would you consider being my friend?" asked Bat. "I'll teach you how to hang upside down, and I'll even teach you how to catch bugs. What do you say?"

"That sounds wonderful," said the cat. "You've got a deal. When do you think we could start? Do you think you could teach me how to fly too? I think I'm going to like being friends with you."

Mr. Tan lived in the last house at the end of a shady lane. Everybody knew which house was Mr. Tan's because there were birdhouses in every tree in his yard. Mr. Tan built the birdhouses. The special thing about Mr. Tan's birdhouses was that each one was different.

Mr. Tan made every birdhouse different because every birdhouse was meant for a different bird. Mr. Tan built blue houses for the blue jays. He built red houses for the cardinals. He also built special brown and ivory houses for the sparrows.

"Birds need houses, just like people," Mr. Tan would tell the children who came to visit him. "Birds need houses to keep them warm and cozy in the winter. They need houses to keep their eggs safe. Here, would you like to see?" Mr. Tan would say. Then he'd lead the children across the yard to a birdhouse. He would take off the top and lift the children up one at a time to show them what was inside.

"Wow," the children would say when they saw the eggs. "They are very pretty. When will they hatch, Mr. Tan?"

"Oh, any day now," Mr. Tan would say. "They will hatch when they are ready. Then I'll have more birdhouses to build, won't I?"

Mr. Tan didn't just build birdhouses for his own yard. He built tiny houses all winter long. In the spring, he put them up on fence posts and in trees all over the countryside. Mr. Tan was hardly ever seen without a birdhouse in his hands and a tiny bird perched on his shoulder.

Every summer, birds that had flown south for the winter would return to Mr. Tan's yard. Each year, they would find their houses, firm and sound, just waiting for them to return.

Sam was a snake who lived in a large cage at the zoo. The cage had both inside and outside areas. Sam's best friend was a lizard named Lilly who lived in the same cage.

Every day Sam and Lilly would lounge in the sun on a wide rock. People were always pointing at Sam and Lilly.

Lilly was very pretty. She had black and orange scales and yellow eyes. Sam was very dull. He had brown scales and even browner eyes.

Sometimes the kids who came to the zoo didn't even see Sam stretched out on the rock beside Lilly. Sam and the rock were the same shade of brown, so the kids didn't always notice Sam. The boys and girls only noticed Lilly.

Sometimes Sam was jealous. He wanted to be noticed too. He couldn't help being so very brown.

"What a beautiful lizard," the boys and girls would whisper to each other when they spotted Lilly. "Look at her black and orange scales. Look at her yellow eyes."

"She's not so lovely," Sam would whisper under his breath. Then he would feel awful because, after all, Lilly was his friend.

Lilly slept through the praise coming from the people on the other side of the fence. She only cared about the sun on her back, the warm rock beneath her, and her friend Sam.

Sometimes Lilly would reach out to catch a fly with one long whip of her tongue. The school children clapped when she caught one. But Lilly just ignored them and laid her head back down on the rock and fell back to sleep.

"How can you sleep with them watching you?" Sam hissed one day.

"Oh, I don't care about them, Sam," Lilly yawned. "I'm just glad we get to spend our days together." Sam felt better knowing he was perfect in Lilly's eyes.

Nora lived in a sparkling stream that ran through an oak forest. One day while a brother and sister were splashing in the stream, they noticed Nora swimming lazily in the current.

"I'm going to catch that fish," said the brother. "We'll fry it for lunch. Mmmm," he smiled. "I can already taste the fresh fried fish."

His sister felt differently.

"Let's leave the fish alone," she urged her brother. "We have plenty of nuts and berries to eat. That fish looks pretty in the stream. Why should we bother it?"

"I am hungry for fish," said the brother as he made himself a fishing pole. "You'll be hungry for fish too, as soon as I catch it."

The brother didn't realize that Nora wasn't a fish at all. She was magical, and she could be anything she wanted to be. As Nora swam in the clear water, she listened to every word said between the boy and girl. Nora thought she would play a trick on the boy.

The brother dipped his pole into the stream near Nora. Nora swam up and took the bait.

"I caught it!" yelled the brother. "I am the best fisherman in the whole world."

The brother tugged his line out of the water, but only found a muddy stick dangling from the end of it.

"I was sure I caught that fish," he said with a surprised look.

The sister grinned when she noticed silver eyes on the stick and realized it was really Nora. She didn't tell her brother though.

"Give me the stick," the sister said, as she tossed it back into the stream. The stick winked at her, and she happily winked back.

Andy was one of the many ants who worked daily in the anthill. Every day Andy and the other ants would wake up and go off to work. Andy's job was to carry pieces of sand up the side of the anthill to build it higher. Andy thought his job was really boring. Who would find carrying pieces of sand interesting? All Andy did day after day was stack tiny pieces of sand on top of other tiny pieces of sand. Where was the challenge in that?

All Andy really wanted was to create a daring new kind of anthill. He wanted to build a modern castle. He could see the castle in his mind, and that goal made him continue his daily grind.

One day Andy spoke to his friend, Sally. He took a chance and told her about his dream. "I don't want to build anthills, Sally. I want to build a modern castle."

"I don't know, Andy," said Sally. "Ants have lived in anthills for a very long time."

"I need to tell someone who will understand," Andy thought.

The next day Andy went to see Queen Ant. He shook with fear as he knocked on her door.

"Come in," said a low, pretty voice.

Andy stepped inside the queen's chambers. There were beautiful pictures on the walls and a bright carpet underfoot. The queen wore a golden crown. She was much bigger than Andy.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she said to Andy.

Andy showed her his plans for building a castle. "You are a lovely queen," Andy told her. "Lovely queens should live in castles. I'm the ant who knows how to build them."

"You are right," the queen said. "You may start building my castle tomorrow."

All the other boys in the neighborhood had new bikes. Some of the new bikes were black and yellow. Some were bright silver with racing wheels. I knew I couldn't have a new bike, but I got to ride my big brother's old bike. At first I was thrilled because it was faster than my old bike. It was blue with a banana seat. But the other boys laughed when they saw me riding it.

The boys liked to ride around on their bikes in a group. They rode together through our neighborhood. Sometimes they rode the trails that went through the woods. Their favorite thing to do was jump high off of ramps.

The boys built ramps out of old boards and plywood stacked on top of discarded bricks. Each boy tried to jump the highest and the farthest. Sometimes two or three of the boys would lie down on the ground to watch behind the ramp. Then, a boy on a bike would pedal furiously and jump his bike over their bodies. I thought they were cool! Sometimes, I tried to jump my bike over the ramp, but my bike was too heavy to go very far. When the other boys laughed at me, I felt bad.

One day, I asked my dad why I had to ride my brother's old bike. He said, "Do you like your bike?"

"Yes," I said, "but I don't like to be laughed at because it makes me feel bad."

"Well, if you like your bike, then that is really all that matters," Dad replied. "A true friend will like you no matter what kind of bike you ride." From then on, I didn't worry much about what the other boys thought about my bike. I knew I had a great bike!

Out of all the beetles in the woods, Betsy Beetle had the most beautiful shell. Betsy's shell was as green as the leaves on the trees. It was covered with tiny flecks of gold that looked like stars. It shimmered as if it were wet.

Betsy was always down at the lake, scrubbing and polishing her shell. "A bug has to keep up her looks," Betsy would tell all the other beetles. "We were given such great shells. We might as well keep them nice and shiny."

All of Betsy's friends were getting sick of Betsy and her shell. Last week Emma, who had a brown shell without gold specks, bumped into Betsy and spilled tea on her shell.

"I'm so sorry," Emma said. "Pardon me, Betsy."

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" Betsy shouted at Emma. "You're always walking around the woods with your head in the clouds. You are so rude, Emma!"

"I didn't mean to spill my tea on Betsy," Emma sadly told the other beetles after Betsy walked away. "I guess I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Betsy's always been that way," said Ted, a plain black bug. "She thinks she's really something special with that shell."

The next day all the beetles were bathing in the lake when Ted splashed mud on Betsy's shell.

"Ted, you are so mean!" she declared. "I just polished my beautiful shell. I've been up since dawn! Now look at it. Why, I'm going to...."

Just then, a blackbird swooped from the sky, catching Betsy in his beak and cutting off her words. One second Betsy was threatening Ted, and the next second she was gone.

"I guess a lovely shell isn't always a good thing," Emma said to everyone.

The wolf pack ran all through the long night. The wolves sped across snow- and ice-covered lakes. They raced through forests and fields that were covered with a sparkling frost. The hungry wolves hadn't eaten for days.

The leader of the pack was a huge, gray wolf with yellow eyes and sharp white teeth. All the wolves followed him because he was the swiftest, smartest wolf in the area. He understood the movement of the deer herd. He could locate holes in the ice so he and his pack could catch fish. He knew how to catch field mice and gobble them down in one swallow.

Tonight the leader of the pack led the wolves through a mountain pass. They were hunting for elk. A single elk could keep them fed and warm for several days.

When the leader saw an elk, he raced across the snow followed by the other wolves. The wolves formed a circle around the elk and chased it through the woods. They followed the elk along the edge of a river. The elk escaped from the wolf pack. The elk was lucky, but the wolves were unlucky.

Since the wolves had nothing to eat, they began to howl. The leader of the pack howled first. He lifted his shaggy gray head and let out a long, low sound. Then the other wolves joined in. Finally, even the baby wolves howled.

In the midst of their howling, the wolves spied a deer walking in the field below. On silent feet, the wolves chased the deer. The deer was smaller than and not as strong as the elk. This time the wolves had a better chance. By morning they had caught the deer and were warm and fed. Now they could rest.