

STIMULUS BOOKLET

Oral Reading Fluency

Grade 5

The fox wasn't wise like the owl, thrifty like the squirrel, hard working like the beaver, or determined like the robin. The fox was sly and secretive.

She slept most of the days away in her den with her kits curled around her. She went out to hunt only on nights when the moon was hidden by clouds. Not many of the other animals saw her during the day or met up with her at night.

"I know that nasty fox is stealing hens from the henhouse," the squirrel told the owl one afternoon as they sat on a branch and gossiped.

"That's why she doesn't show her red nose around here during the day. That thieving fox makes me angry."

The owl didn't say anything. She thought about the rabbit she'd caught that morning and held her tongue. What would the squirrel have to say about her after she'd heard that she ate rabbits for breakfast?

That evening at sunset as the fox slipped out of her den, her fur was a fiery red in the light of the setting sun and her eyes were black and clever. She was just about to slip under the farmer's fence when she heard someone snicker at her from a tree branch above.

It was the robin. "Good evening, fox," she said. "Where are you off to this fine night? There was a ruckus at the farm yesterday morning. I heard it when I flew over in search of worms. It seems some creature has been sneaking into the henhouse and stealing hens. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

The fox ignored the rude robin and slipped under the fence, but instead of heading toward the farm as she did most nights, she cut down to the river.

Beaver was working on his dam, and he watched with awe as the fox caught three fish in a row and tossed them on the shore. He'd always known the fox was as smart as she was sly.

Leo went to the forest every day to gather firewood. He would collect the wood, tie it into small bundles, and carry the bundles home each day. He would pack his lunch and stay in the forest until sunset. At noon he would have his lunch, and at noon a bird would visit him. It was white with ash-colored wings and was larger than a dove but smaller than an eagle. Leo always shared a morsel of his food with the bird. Leo called it Jayto and would talk to it from time to time.

One very hot summer day, Leo began to eat his lunch and Jayto arrived right on time. Leo gave him some of his lunch, and the bird eagerly pecked at it. It was so hot, Leo decided to take a nap. As he lay down, the bird began to peck and caw at him. The bird was able to convince Leo to follow him. Jayto kept flying small distances waiting for Leo to catch up. Finally they came upon a broken stone wall.

Leo had once heard that a rich businessman used to live here long ago. One day he left for a foreign country and never returned. His wife lived alone for a long time, and it was said that she buried her jewelry box and that a strange bird stood guard over it attacking anyone that got near.

Was it possible that Jayto was this bird? Suddenly the bird flew from the wall to the ground and started pecking. Leo helped the bird, and sure enough, they uncovered a jewelry box. It was filled with gold, diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones.

Leo decided not to go back to town for fear that his treasure would be taken from him. With Jayto on his shoulder, he traveled to a large city far away. He became a rich man and built a beautiful mansion. The mansion had a large garden filled with ponds and flowers. Jayto had all the mangoes that he could eat, and Leo lived a long and happy life.

Reginald the rabbit wanted to travel. He sat in his hutch reading books about trains and planes. He read books about faraway lands. He wanted to travel around the world.

Reginald packed a bag. His bag held clothes, food, and money. He said goodbye to his friends and hopped off.

"I'm off to see the world!" he shouted. "I'm sure I'll have a very exciting journey."

"See you later," replied his friends. "We hope you have a good trip. We will miss you!"

Reginald wasn't sure how much he would miss his friends. They were just regular friends, and they were always there. He wanted some different friends. He wanted some interesting friends from different places.

Reginald was ready to see the world. He wanted to travel around the world as much as possible. His first trip was to the bus stop. He planned to take a bus to the airport. The bus driver was surprised to see a rabbit get on the bus. The bus was comfortable, and the people were very nice to Reginald. They said rabbits should ride buses more often.

Reginald got off the bus at the airport and went straight to his airplane. He quickly hopped on his flight, and the plane took off. He was the first rabbit to fly in a seat and not in the cargo area with the suitcases. He was a real passenger. The plane took him across an ocean. He looked out the window and saw nothing but water below. "The world is a very big place with many different people," Reginald thought. "It is not like my home with my friends and my comfortable hutch."

The plane landed in another country where the people spoke a different language. Reginald didn't understand the people. He got off the plane, carried his bag through the airport, and found a taxi. The taxi took him to the train station. He rode the train for several days. Reginald enjoyed the train ride. When the train ride was over, he was bored. He liked visiting other countries, but he missed his friends. He took a boat home, and his friends were happy to see him. "I like to travel, but I think I like home best," said Reginald.

Chuck was an excellent student. He was attentive to his teachers and kind to his fellow classmates. He sat quietly on the bus and held his sister's hand when they crossed busy intersections.

Chuck and his family lived next to an airport. At night, Chuck would lie in his bed and listen to the huge planes fly overhead. One night while Chuck was trying to fall asleep, he got an idea.

The next morning, Chuck put his idea into action. He found a big, thick piece of paper and folded it several times. When he was done, he didn't have much more than a crumpled paper ball. He got frustrated and threw it toward the trash. It flew through the air, but it didn't soar. Chuck wanted to make something that soared.

At school, Chuck was the first one to sign up to visit the library when the teacher asked. At the library, Chuck loaded his arms with books on airplanes and flying machines.

The rest of the afternoon, Chuck hardly listened to his teacher. Instead, he looked out the window and daydreamed. He imagined he was in a jet that could fly faster than sound. He imagined he was the bravest and most daring pilot in the history of the world.

While Chuck was daydreaming, his teacher called on him. Chuck looked up and started to blush. He had to admit that he hadn't been paying attention. When the final bell rang, the teacher asked Chuck to stay after class.

"I'm worried about you, Chuck," she said. "You always pay attention." Chuck told her what he'd been daydreaming about.

"So, you want to learn how to construct a paper airplane?" she asked with a smile. Then she reached over and lifted a piece of paper off her desk. Chuck watched as she did some fancy folds and a few clever twists. When she was finished, she held a beautiful paper plane out to him.

"Go ahead and try it," she said.

Chuck threw the airplane. It soared across the room, out the door, and down the hall. It flew further than even Chuck would have imagined.

It's like a jungle in my grandmother's house because she has so many plants. Even though she has enough plants out in her front yard, she still insists on having more. There are rows of tulips near her house, big clumps of ferns, and hedges of roses in the back. There are also pots of houseplants inside.

She brings as many of her outdoor plants inside as she can for the winter.

"I don't want the poor dears to freeze," she tells me, as I stare in awe at her rooms filled with greenery. "Besides," she likes to say, "a house full of plants is much cozier than a house without. And mark my words, there's more magic in a house filled with plants."

"Okay, Grandma," I say because I don't want to argue with her.

One night I slept in a sleeping bag on the floor of my grandma's front parlor. The front parlor by far has the most plants in the house. My two older brothers call it the jungle room because we can no longer see the wallpaper. All we see when we walk in the door are leaves and colorful flowers. It actually smells quite nice.

I was secretly excited to be camping out there because it would almost be like sleeping in a real forest minus the hard ground. Grandma made a fire in the fireplace that night so I could roast marshmallows and read books. I read until around midnight. At about that time, the fire went out and my aching eyes dropped shut. I closed my book and laid my head on the pillow.

It was then that I heard the rustling and the whispers.

"Hey," a tiny voice called out in the darkness, "do you think they're all asleep yet?"

"Be quiet." another one hissed. "We've got one right in the room with us."

I heard more rustling of leaves and whispers, more hissing and scolding, and then I saw them. Gnomes, I guess, is what they're called. They were short and skinny with pointed ears and glowing green eyes.

They thought I was asleep, so they didn't bother me much.

Santo and his family lived at the base of a great mountain. The top of the mountain was ringed with clouds. Its flanks were covered in tall trees and grasses. The mountain protected them from the fierce winds that swept the land. The lake in the mountain's shadow provided them with fresh water and fish. Santo, his family, and the people of the village believed there was no better place in the world to live. The mountain was their protector, and it would stand forever.

Every year the village had a great feast to celebrate the mountain and give thanks. People ate until their stomachs were full and danced until their feet ached. Everyone went to bed happy and slept well into the next day. At least, that's what they'd done every other year.

Santo knew that something wasn't right when he woke up on the morning of the feast. He was still sleepy, but he knew he had felt the earth tremble, for just a moment, under his feet. Nobody else felt the quiver. They laughed and told him the ground would tremble that evening while they were dancing. Santo left the room to stand outside. He began talking to the mountain as he sometimes did.

"I know I felt the ground move beneath my feet just a moment ago," he told the great swell of rock. "I wasn't imagining things."

Santo thought the mountain understood him, as he watched a curl of smoke escape from its tall peak. Santo shook his head. Now, he most certainly was imagining things.

Just then he heard his sister squeal from inside the house. "Yuck," she said, "this water tastes like rotten eggs. We can't have our water tasting like rotten eggs for the feast tonight. It will ruin everything."

Santo continued to watch the mountain. He didn't know when, but he knew something was going to happen.

"Santo, come and eat your breakfast," his mother called from inside the house. "We have a big day ahead of us."

Kirby never had any money for candy, but his friends always did. Every afternoon on his walk home from school, Kirby would follow his friends down the sidewalk and across the street to the candy shop.

There were trays of candy set up in rows in the front display window. There were chocolate drops and licorice sticks. There were jelly beans, salted peanuts, and candy corn. There was so much candy, but Kirby could never afford anything. Sometimes his friends would give him a piece of candy corn or a chunk of chocolate, but most of the time they forgot to share.

One afternoon, Kirby was standing at the counter of the candy store with his friends when the old man who made all the candy and owned the shop spoke to him.

"How come you never buy any candy for yourself, young man?" he asked. Kirby shoved his hands in his pockets. He didn't want to say that he didn't have any money, so he told a little lie instead.

"Umm, I don't have a sweet tooth, that's all," Kirby said. "I've never really liked candy very much."

The old man smiled at Kirby. He was practically bald but had a mustache that curled up on the ends. "Then you are the perfect person to work in my shop," he told Kirby with a smile. "You will start tomorrow. I will pay you for your work, and since you don't have a sweet tooth, you can buy something salty with your wages."

The next day Kirby started his new job. He stretched taffy and bagged hard candy. He dusted shelves and swept the floors. He also watched the old man as he worked. Sometimes the old man would insist that Kirby try one of his sweets.

"Here," he would say while shoving a piece of fudge at Kirby. "Try this fudge, and tell me if your friends will like it. Do you think I should add more marshmallows or more sugar?"

Kirby would take a bite of fudge, and it would melt in his mouth. "I think they'll love it just the way it is," he would say.

Alex loved to visit his Great Aunt Heidi because she had a library filled with books. The library's shelves held books on every subject. There were books on rocks and books on clocks. There were books on mountains and books on fountains. But the one thing that made Aunt Heidi's library really special was the library's elves.

Library elves are rare little creatures. Most people think they are extinct, but a few still exist. Many of them live behind the books on the shelves of Aunt Heidi's library.

Alex discovered the elves one blustery winter afternoon when he was searching the shelves for a book about airplanes. He'd climbed all the way to the top of the library ladder and was straining to reach a thick book, when suddenly he heard a voice. It was a warm and friendly voice.

"Here you go," the voice said, and Alex felt the book he'd been reaching for pop into his hands. Alex tumbled off the ladder. He would have hit the stone floor with a hard thud had it not been for the library elf's magic. The elf cast a magic spell that stopped him an inch from the ground and then set him down gently.

"Thanks," Alex said to the little elf. "I owe you one."

The elf peered down from his shelf at Alex. He wore a felt cap and a sweater knitted in several colors. "Yes, you do," the elf said. "I would like you to read that book to me."

Alex looked at the book in his hands. He'd forgotten all about airplanes when the elf first spoke to him.

"Okay," Alex said. Then he sat down in a cushy chair in front of the fire and started to read. He read several chapters without looking up. When he finally looked up, he saw a dozen library elves sitting on the braided rug in front of him. All of the elves were listening intently.

"Don't stop," they told him. "Read, read, read."

Alex read to them long into the night. He finished the book and looked up to find the library elves were gone. They had vanished as soon as he had read the last word on the last page.

The tallest tree in the forest stood in a clearing filled with clover and delicate moss. Its shadow was so huge and thick that only low grasses and flowers could grow beneath the tree.

Ever since Charles first saw that great tree, he'd wanted to climb to the top. Its branches started out low to the ground and swept right to its very tip like the rungs of a ladder. Charles thought it would be a good challenge for him to climb the tree.

One morning Charles arose early and sprinted to the base of the great tree. He told no one about his plans. He hoped to surprise his family over breakfast when he walked through the door with a bough from the top of the tree in his hands.

"Today is the day I will touch the sky," Charles proclaimed as he spit on his hands and rubbed them together. Without much thought, he heaved himself up to the first branch. The branch was thick and gently curved. Charles could have relaxed there all afternoon, but he chose to pull himself up another branch.

The next branch was sticky with sap and dried needles. The sap coated Charles' trousers and got stuck in his hair, but he kept climbing. Twenty feet above the ground, Charles paused to catch his breath. He glanced down at the ground and felt his stomach roll. His heart jumped in his chest. "It's a long way down," Charles thought, "but it's an even longer way up." Charles chose to keep on climbing.

Now the branches of the great tree grew closer together. Charles had to shimmy between them. He made the mistake of looking down again, and he had to close his eyes and count to one hundred before he was ready to climb again. The crown of the tree was still out of his reach.

Charles pondered his predicament. He looked up, and then he looked down. With a sigh, he started back down the tree. Not all things were possible. "Some things," Charles thought as he looked up at the colossal tree from the ground, "should remain a challenge."

Charles went home and washed the sap out of his hair. Tomorrow he'd think of a new challenge.

First Street School is holding its eighth annual carnival. It will be held on March third from four to nine o'clock. Everyone in town is invited to join the fun, excitement, and thrills.

The fifth-grade students will decorate the hallways at the school. They will hang up colorful streamers, bright balloons, curly ribbons, and tiny lights. Each hallway will be decorated in a special theme. The main hallway that passes the principal's office will be done in a western style.

The carnival will offer over thirty games. There will be a cakewalk, a miniature fishing pond, and a giant ring toss. A new game called "Tower" will be introduced. Players will build towers out of straws, cotton balls, and pipe cleaners. The children who build the tallest towers that don't fall down will win.

One room will have strobe lights, mirrors, and music for dancing. Another room will have face painting. Choices for pictures will include a glittered butterfly, a Martian, a variety of flowers, clowns, and superheroes.

The gymnasium will have a maze racetrack set up. Racers will wear gunnysacks and use scooters to navigate through the maze. Students can go on a treasure hunt in the music room. Partners will work together to locate and collect hidden objects. One partner will wear a blindfold while the other partner gives clues for finding items written on a list.

Students can win great prizes during the games and activities. Contestants can win stuffed animals, yo-yos, wind-up cars, whistles, beaded jewelry, key chains, plastic insects or dinosaurs, glow-in-the-dark neon sticks, comic or joke books, magician kits, and all other sorts of cool prizes.

People can eat a snack or dinner in the cafeteria. Foods on the menu will include fruits, popcorn, hot dogs, hamburgers, carrots, pickles, salad, juice or milk, cookies, and fries.

The kids at First Street School can hardly wait for the carnival to begin. It'll be the best carnival ever!

It was October, and the leaves were falling from the trees. Ducks and geese were flying south. Bears were preparing for their winter slumber. The cool wind blew smoke from chimneys, and people were wearing sweaters and coats.

Squirrel was storing acorns for the season ahead. He knew winter would be long and cold, and he had to be ready. His fur was growing thicker, his body was storing fat, and he was storing acorns in his nest for winter. He had to hurry. Eventually it would snow, and it would be hard to find acorns then.

Acorns were Squirrel's favorite food. He liked to eat them for breakfast. He liked to eat them for lunch. He even liked to eat them for supper or for an afternoon snack. Squirrel needed to store many acorns for the winter!

Squirrel ran down his tree trunk and searched the grass under his tree. Tasty acorns were hidden in the grass. He found an acorn, put it in his mouth, and ran back up the tree. He dropped it in his nest, which was a little hole in the tree. His nest would keep him warm all winter. When he was done, he ran back down to look for more acorns.

Squirrel spent the whole day finding acorns. Sometimes he found them lying on top of the grass. Sometimes he found them still hanging in the trees. He looked for acorns that he had buried earlier in the summer. Over the year, he had buried hundreds of acorns, but sometimes he forgot where he buried them. He would dig a little hole where he thought he had buried one. When he didn't find an acorn, he would dig a little hole in another place. Then he'd find a juicy acorn. He'd scurry up the tree with his newfound treasure and put it in his cozy nest.

Because he worked so hard, Squirrel's tasty acorns kept him well fed all winter.

On cold winter mornings, Jane would get up at 4:30 a.m. when it was still very dark. She was always still sleepy, but she knew what was waiting for her was worth it.

After Jane dressed in her warmest shirt and wool sweater, she would tiptoe into the kitchen where she would find her dad sitting at the table. He would be reading the morning paper and eating breakfast. Jane would have her breakfast too, and they'd linger in the warm kitchen for a few extra minutes.

Then Jane would pull on her red snowsuit, and her dad would button up his heavy jacket. They would walk outside together into the crisp morning air. It was often so chilly that Jane could see her breath in clouds in front of her. It was usually so chilly that a sparkling layer of frost would cover the fence posts and her dad's tractor.

All the barn cats would sleep in a pile of hay just inside the door to the barn. They learned they could keep each other warm that way. Jane and her dad would go into the cozy barn that smelled of hay and warm animals. As soon as the baby calves would see Jane and her dad, they'd start to bawl. It was Jane's job to feed the calves, and they learned that when Jane showed up, they were about to get something good.

Jane's dad would help her fill big plastic bottles with warm milk. The baby cows would watch her with their big brown eyes as Jane carried the bottles to them in the back of the barn. Jane would prop the bottles up against her hip as she fed each calf. Sometimes a little calf would buck, and Jane would jump back and laugh. She wouldn't stop feeding them until every calf drank all the milk it needed to grow strong.

Jane had many jobs on the farm. She milked cows, fed chickens, and sometimes shoveled manure. But feeding the calves was by far her favorite job.

One day Fern was collecting herbs in the forest when she heard voices in the glen just over the hill. Fern knew that all the land that stretched for miles around belonged to her father. She knew that only outlaws and criminals would dare trespass on her father's land. Her father was very wealthy, and he forbade people to walk on his land without his consent.

Fern had her father's permission, so she wasn't too worried about trespassing. She was, however, worried about the voices she heard. The owners of the voices might try to kidnap her. After all, she was the daughter of a rich man. Still, Fern couldn't stamp out her curiosity. She had to see who was trespassing on her father's land.

As quietly as she could, Fern crept up the slanting slope and peeked over the top. There was no one there to listen to. The forest was silent. The only sounds were those of tree branches swaying gently in the breeze. Fern tipped her head and listened.

"You're not hearing things are you, dear?" a voice asked. The voice came from high up in the trees. As soon as Fern heard it, she knew it wasn't a human voice and she started to back away.

"Ah now, don't be scared, dear," the voice said. Just then a tree branch swooped down and blocked Fern's retreat.

"I wouldn't dream of hurting you, lovely Fern. You're named after a plant. How could one plant hurt another?" asked the voice.

Fern was confused for a moment. What did the voice mean by that? Then she realized it was a plant that was speaking to her. In fact, it was a colossal oak tree.

The tree opened its branches so Fern could make out the ancient face of an old woman carved in the bark. Her eyes appeared wise.

"I was talking to myself," she told Fern. "Sometimes I get lonely. Tell me about yourself, dear girl."

"My name's Fern," Fern stammered.

"That I already know," said the tree. "It's warm today. Would you like me to fan you with my branches? It's been a while since I could do something for a friend."

"Okay," said Fern as she enjoyed the breeze.

There was a creek that ran through the bottom of Susan's family's pasture. The creek was filled with frogs, fish, and flowers. It was shallow, shady and very inviting on hot summer days with the weeping willows growing along the edge of it, hanging their branches down over the water.

Susan and her sisters spent a lot of time down at the creek during the summer. They would pack picnic lunches and eat them on the banks of the creek as they watched the cows in the pasture and their father on his tractor.

When they got hot, they would roll up their pant legs and wade in the water. They looked for pretty rocks and snail shells. They made fishing poles out of fallen branches and safety pins. They also hunted for frogs with their bare hands. They snickered at the cows when they waded in for a drink, and they splashed each other every chance they got.

"This creek is the most beautiful place in the world," Susan declared to her sisters one afternoon as they soaked their feet. "The water is clean and clear, the rocks are smooth and tiny, and the frogs are quick and clever. The pasture is green, and the cows don't bother us much. I want to stay here forever and not go back to school."

"The creek freezes in the winter, Susan," her youngest sister reminded her. "You can't stay here year round."

Susan sighed. "Yeah, but I wish I could."

"No, you don't," said Susan's other sister. "If you were here all the time, you wouldn't have time for anything else. It's not as if you don't get to spend plenty of time here. We know you love to skate on the creek in the wintertime, look at the pretty leaves floating on it in autumn, and see the lily pads and the willows bud in the spring, but there are other things you would miss doing."

"You're right, both of you," Susan agreed. "Sometimes I get carried away."

Just then a fish took the bait on the end of her line, and Susan jumped up. She spent the rest of the day laughing with her sisters.

It was raining outside, and there was nothing for Norman to do.

"I have the most boring life," he moaned, as he plopped down on the couch. Just as he switched on the television, the power went out. Watching a blank television was not something Norman wanted to do. He looked around at the four dismal walls that kept him out of the rain.

"Now what am I going to do?"

"You could tidy up your room," his mom suggested, "or organize your closet. Your closet is a disaster, Norman. I'm actually frightened of what you might find in there. You haven't cleaned it in a decade."

There was nothing Norman could say after his mom had made up her mind. He was going to have to clean out his closet.

The only problem was that Norman couldn't even open his closet door. He had it held closed with a large wooden block. There was so much junk in there that it wouldn't stay shut on its own. To push aside the wooden block and open the door would mean doom for Norman. He'd be crushed by falling trash as soon as he turned the knob. He decided that he would only pretend to clean his closet, but his mother came into his bedroom.

"Well," she said, placing her hands on her hips, "let's see you get to work."

Norman put both hands on the doorknob and tugged. The entire doorframe gave a mighty CREAK. There was a loud rumble as Norman was pushed back by the wave of forgotten junk he'd jammed into his closet. When the loud noise faded, Norman was lying on his back under a mountain of broken toys, dirty socks, and books. With a groan, he lifted himself to his feet.

There was an awful smell wafting from somewhere inside. Norman looked into the depths of his closet. It was dark, dreary, and mysterious. Anything—absolutely anything—could be hiding in there. Maybe trolls, ghouls, or gnomes, Norman thought. This job could be an adventure! Pushing up his sleeves, Norman got to work.

The sky was clear blue when Alicia began her walk. Alicia liked to explore the forest right behind her house. Since Alicia was ten years old, her parents didn't mind if she walked alone in the woods, as long as she stayed on the path. All of the trees and plants were like old friends.

This afternoon something in the woods seemed different. The bird songs, which were usually so cheerful, seemed nervous. Then a sudden movement in an oak tree caught her attention. It was a gray squirrel she knew well. He'd come close to her on several occasions.

Now he was chattering anxiously at her, and he seemed to be trying to tell her something. He leapt from one tree to another and looked back at her. "He wants me to follow him," Alicia said to herself.

She went after him, walking farther into the woods, but when his trail led off the path, she hesitated. She didn't want to get in trouble or get lost. His calls were so insistent, however, that she continued after him.

Finally, he stopped on a birch tree and ran up and down the trunk. His tail twitched furiously. Alicia started looking around, knowing he wanted to show her something. Then she saw it. A fragile, tiny baby bird was huddled on the ground under the tree. Looking up, Alicia saw a nest almost completely hidden by leaves.

Alicia bent down to inspect the baby bird. Its bright eyes were unafraid. She scooped it up and gently placed it in her shirt pocket. Fortunately, the tree had many branches, and Alicia had a lot of experience climbing trees. She climbed up carefully, and once she was high enough, she looked into the nest. The nest held three other tiny birds identical to the one in her pocket.

She gently pulled her bird out and set it with the others. It nestled in and seemed happy to be home. As she walked back, the squirrel followed her, chattering the whole way. Alicia could tell he was thanking her for her help.

"I cannot fall asleep," Ned said to himself quietly. The stars outside were shining brightly through his window, and the starlight pooled on his bedspread, giving off a silver glare against his shut eyelids. Ned pressed his eyes closed very tightly, but that didn't seem to help.

Finally Ned sat up and peered out his window. The stars were gorgeous tonight. Ned was sure he could see just about every constellation in the universe. He knew from school that a constellation was a group of stars that formed a picture in the sky. Out of all the constellations that were out tonight, the Big Dipper glowed the brightest. It was so bright, its light made Ned squint.

Since Ned was very curious about the night sky and he wasn't sleeping anyway, he crept from his bed. He went outside and stood on his lawn. He was barefoot and in his flannel pajamas, but he didn't care how he looked because everyone else on his block was sleeping.

He tipped back his head and looked up. He watched the stars for a long time. He watched for so long that the stars seemed to move right before his eyes. A cluster of stars that looked like a horse galloped across the sky and hurdled the moon. A man walked along with a sword, swinging it at other stars as if they were baseballs. Then, to Ned's surprise, the Big Dipper dipped down and picked him up. It lifted him high up into the dark sky.

"This is great," Ned hollered, clinging to one of the corner stars. "Yahoo! Let's go to Jupiter!"

The Big Dipper must have heard him because the huge constellation abruptly turned and soared toward Jupiter. Ned was able to study the huge planet up close. He even got to poke his finger in the huge storm that brewed on one side of the planet.

Ned soared around the sky all night. Finally at dawn, the Big Dipper dipped down and dropped Ned off on his front lawn. Then all the stars faded from the sky. What an exciting night of stargazing!

My best friend Jeff and I decided to explore my attic one afternoon. We used to go up there when we were younger and pretend to be soldiers or cowboys. The attic is a creepy place. There's a bookshelf, a bunch of old junk, and tons of spider webs.

When we got up there, Jeff bumped the bookshelf, and a stone hallway came into view. I couldn't believe it. It was a trap door! Jeff went in and motioned for me to follow. It was very dark, and as we walked along the hallway, it got darker and darker. We came to a large room with a golden chair in it. We continued exploring and suddenly bumped into something. Again, I couldn't believe it. It was two other kids about our age.

"What are you doing here?" we all shouted at the same time. What were these strangers doing in my attic? We had never seen them before, and their clothes were unusual. One of them was wearing a gown, the other was wearing a tunic, and both of them were wearing crowns.

We stared at each other for a long time. It was uncomfortable just standing there. Finally one of them asked, "What are you doing in our kingdom?" Jeff and I gave each other a strange look. We both turned and looked toward the bookshelf. It was gone! Where were we? Could it be that we somehow traveled in time to a medieval world?

We must have looked scared because the boy wearing the tunic said, "Take it easy. We'll show you around, and of course, we'll show you the way out."

Even though I would much rather read about an adventure than have one, that afternoon turned out just fine anyway. Our newfound friends were very hospitable. We met the other members of their families and learned a great deal about what life was like during the Middle Ages. The time passed quickly, and before we knew it, we had to say goodbye. That afternoon was one attic adventure we would never forget.

Every spring Keesha waited impatiently for the last of the snow to melt. During the winter, she enjoyed sledding and skating. Occasionally, she even got to go snowboarding, which was a special treat. But Keesha thought winter lasted too long, and she really missed being able to ride her bike.

The very moment the bike path was open, Keesha would take off. Oh, how good it felt to be bicycling again! Keesha biked along the river and then headed into the suburbs. The path passed train tracks, a creek, and two parks. The first park had a pond with lots of noisy geese. The other park had a small petting zoo.

Even more appealing early in the biking season was the chance to rest. Both parks offered many comfortable places to sit while enjoying the view. Keesha's winter activities used different muscles, so she got tired and sore rather quickly. It was a relief to get off of her bike for a while. However, then getting back on was really hard, and Keesha worried that she wouldn't be able to make it all the way back. She didn't want to get stuck far from home with no energy left in her legs. Then she'd have to call her parents to pick her up.

Usually Keesha biked with one or more of her friends. If they weren't available, she'd ride with her brother. Although they both would complain loudly about the other's company, they actually liked doing something together for a change.

"You're biking farther every year," Keesha's father observed one morning. "Do you mind if I join you today? You could show me which paths are the best." Keesha was surprised. In the past, her dad had always been too busy to go biking. Now he seemed as eager as his daughter to take advantage of the great trails near their home. "Of course!" agreed Keesha enthusiastically. They soon set off along the bike path, with Keesha's father expressing delight in everything they passed.

Then he started to tire. "These old legs of mine aren't up for much," he explained. "We're going to have to head back. But let's go out again tomorrow, okay? There's so much more to explore." Keesha started planning the best route for them to take. It would be fun showing him her favorite spots.

One weekend both my parents had to work, so I went to visit my Great Aunt Viola. Auntie lives in a stone cottage covered with mosses near the shore of a winding stream. Despite the fact that her nearest neighbor lives five miles away, Auntie has many friends.

When I arrived, one of her dearest friends, Jack Raspberry, was on her roof cleaning out her chimney. Auntie was standing in her driveway with her hands on her hips and her head tipped back laughing at him. Jack was covered with soot and ash, but he was good-natured enough to wave at me as I climbed out of my parent's car.

"Why, good morning, Velvet!" he said.

He stopped what he was doing and did a little dance. Everyone gasped because he bobbed and nearly tumbled off the roof. Luckily, he caught himself just in time and bowed as we clapped. Aunt Viola clapped the loudest.

"Great, green crickets!" Aunt Viola shouted out. "Remember when I was just a girl, Jack? Back then I did the jitterbug on Sissy Johnson's roof."

"You sure did," said Jack as he climbed down the ladder. "I've never seen anyone dance better than you, Viola."

Auntie grinned and invited us in for tea. She served the tea in her bright yellow parlor on her finest Queen Anne china. Viola chipped her teacup, but she only shrugged and took another gulp.

"So," she said looking at me. "What are we going to do with ourselves this weekend, Velvet? I figured you could help me weed the garden, and then we'll get ourselves all dressed up and go to a show. When it gets dark, we can chase fireflies."

Jack Raspberry looked at Auntie Viola and asked, "Don't you think you're a bit old for those activities?"

"Jumping jelly beans, child," Auntie exclaimed. "That's the point. I invite Velvet over here on the weekends because I want to feel like a young girl again." She glanced over at me and winked.

"On Sunday," she whispered, "I'll teach you how to ride a horse bareback."

Fanny Jenkins had no patience. She couldn't wait for the butter to melt on her potatoes at dinnertime. She couldn't wait for the tub to fill with water at bath time. She couldn't wait for the sun to shine on a cloudy day.

"Now! Now! Now!" she would shout as she stomped her foot. "I want it sooner, not later! I want it now, not never!"

Fanny's mother was at the end of her rope. She was losing her patience with her daughter. One morning Fanny had wet hair, and her mother wouldn't let her walk to school until it was dry. Fanny had a sore throat, and Fanny's mom was afraid the cold air would make her feel worse.

"I don't want your sore throat to turn into a cold, Fanny," she told her pouting daughter. "You can't get sick. That's the last thing we need around here. You're always so impatient to get well."

Fanny stomped her boot. Sure, her hair was a little wet, but not wet enough for her to catch a stupid cold. "I want to walk to school now," she told her mother. "I want to get there sooner, not later."

With those words, she stomped out the door and down the sidewalk to school. It was a wintry day. The winds were blowing from the north, and they were carrying sleet and snow. By the time Fanny got to class, her bright red curls were icicles.

Sure enough, the next morning Fanny woke up with a stuffy head. "I'm not sick," she told her mother when she came in the room with a thermometer and a bottle of medicine. "I'm never sick. I don't have time to be sick. Sick people are wimps."

"Now, Fanny," her mother said in a calming voice. "You are sick, and you're going to have to stay in bed until you get better." Then she made Fanny take a huge spoonful of horrible tasting medicine.

"Yuck," Fanny complained, and then she sneezed. "I want to be better right now. I have things to do, places to go, and people to see," she told her mother.

"Oh, no you don't," said Fanny's mom. "For once, you have to be patient and wait for your body to get well. Now take a nap, Fanny."

Oscar loved waking up on mornings when snow was falling steadily. He would hurry through breakfast and quickly brush his teeth so he could go outside. Oscar would walk to school and try to catch snowflakes in his mouth.

Oscar wasn't a very graceful boy. It was hard enough for him to walk down the sidewalk without tripping when it wasn't snowing. But when he tipped his head back and held his mouth open, Oscar was a walking disaster. He would run into light posts and parked cars. He would run into fire hydrants and other kids walking to school. So far, Oscar had not managed to catch a single snowflake in his mouth.

Once he caught somebody's hat that had been swept away by the wind. Once he caught a mouthful of car exhaust and coughed all the way to school. Once he caught an acorn falling from an oak tree. But he never caught a snowflake.

Oscar watched the other kids have a grand time catching snowflakes on their tongues. They laughed as they twirled under the falling snow, catching snowflakes every time they opened their mouths.

"I wonder what snowflakes taste like," Oscar said to himself. "I wonder if they taste salty or sweet or maybe even sour?"

One afternoon at recess, Oscar stood in the middle of the playground with his head tipped back and his mouth wide open. Someone threw an eraser in his mouth and everyone laughed. Oscar merely spit it out and resumed his stance. Minutes passed and a million snowflakes fell on his face and slid past his nose. Some snowflakes got caught in his eyelashes, and he had to blink them away. But not a single snowflake landed in his mouth. Then the bell rang and Oscar sighed.

"Drat," he said, and just as he said it, a snowflake landed on his tongue.

"Mmmmm," said Oscar, and he kept his mouth open as he walked toward the door.

In school, Zachary learned that polar bears lived in the Arctic Circle. The Arctic Circle was very far from Zachary's house, so he figured he would never meet one. Then one evening as Zachary was pulling his sled home from the sliding hill, he came face to face with one.

"Oh my stars," Zachary said when he saw the furry white bear. He dropped his sled and stood there, staring at the large polar bear. He knew he should run or do something, but at that moment, he couldn't move.

"Oh my stars," he repeated.

The polar bear stood up on his hind legs and bellowed at Zachary. Zachary was so frightened, he bellowed back. The polar bear was very tall. He towered over Zachary.

"Oh," the bear said stepping back with a clawed paw on his burly chest. "I didn't realize humans could shout so loud. I haven't seen very many humans. May I take a closer look at you?"

"Oh my stars," Zachary said.

"Oh my stars," the polar bear repeated as he bent to Zachary's level. "What in the world does that mean?" As he spoke, the polar bear pushed back Zachary's cap, touched his hair, and poked at his ears.

"Humans have very tiny ears," he told Zachary. "They aren't covered with fur or anything. May I try this on?" the polar bear asked as he pulled off Zachary's cap and stretched it over his own head. The polar bear got it on, but it only covered one of his ears.

"Well, that's neat," the polar bear said as he put the cap back on Zachary's head.

"Hey," he said looking at Zachary's sled. "What's that?"

Zachary couldn't answer the polar bear. He could only stare.

"No, don't tell me," the polar bear said. "I think I know."

With more grace than Zachary would have imagined a polar bear could possess, the bear picked up the sled and carried it to the edge of the sliding hill. Then he daintily tucked his tail and climbed onto the sled.

"Oh my stars!" the bear cried as he whizzed down the hill.

Once upon a time, a boy named Rowan lived with his family in a small village in the mountains. The village was having an especially hard winter. The only wood available for heating and cooking was wet and moldy, so the villagers' fires were small and smoky. Soon even that bad wood was gone.

"Go to find more firewood," Rowan's father ordered. "Then we'll be able to cook some soup and stay warm."

Rowan made his way deep into the forest in search of wood. Although he walked for many miles, no dry branches were to be found on the ground, and Rowan had no ax to use to cut down a tree.

Rowan staggered along as far as he could. But because he was tired and hungry, he finally fell to his knees. Taking this opportunity to rest and look around, Rowan spotted a glimmer in the distance. It came from a silver ax, which was leaning up against a massive oak. The tree was the biggest thing Rowan had ever seen in his life. Its branches stretched far above the other trees and seemed to touch the distant stars.

From the depths of the forest, a gentle voice spoke to the boy. "If you can cut me down, you are worthy of my wood, Rowan the Great."

"Who's Rowan the Great?" the boy Rowan asked, but the forest around him was silent. Rowan picked up the ax and stared at the oak. It was crazy to think that he could chop down such a huge tree, but he had to try. If he didn't bring back wood, his family would have no fire.

When the first swing of the ax sent its blade deep into the bark of the tree, a strange music filled Rowan's ears. He pulled the ax free and swung again and again. Wood chips flew, and sweat gathered on his brow. With a sound like thunder, the tree tipped and fell to the ground. Rowan stared in amazement at his accomplishment. The tree lay on its side, ready to be chopped into firewood. There would be plenty of dry wood so Rowan's family could cook and stay warm no matter how long the winter. In fact, the whole village would now have enough wood to last until spring.

Maria made beautiful clay pots. Her pots were big and round and smooth. She glazed them with a black glaze to show off their perfection. Maria liked that her pots were perfect, but she cared more that they were useful. She made her pots for cooking and carrying water. She made them for everyday use and was pleased to see people eat and drink out of them.

Maria worked with clay every day. She saved a special time in the afternoon each day just for working. During this time, she sat in the cool shadows of her house and rolled the damp clay in her hands.

The clay Maria used for her pots came from the red cliffs in the nearby desert. Whenever she ran out of clay, she had to hike for several miles to get more. Then she carried it back on her shoulders. Maria made every pound of clay count.

Maria made serving bowls so delicate the shadow of a hand could be seen through their sides. She painted clever black and white designs on her jugs and the shapes of birds and animals on her bowls and plates.

As the years went by, Maria became an old woman but still made many pots. People came to visit her just to see her work and learn from her. She became famous in places hundreds of miles from her home. Still, she never put much stock in what other people thought of her work.

Maria continued to make her pots, bowls, and jugs out of the red desert clay even as an old woman. Year after year, she smoothed them with stones and polished them with bits of leather until they glowed. She taught the children who showed interest in pottery how to smooth the lumps from a piece of clay and how to fire up a kiln in the earth to bake the pots. She taught them how to paint delicate snakes, spiders, and dancing men and women on the sides of their pots. But most of all, she taught them how to live a life filled to the fullest with art.

Susanna was the happiest girl in her whole town. She had long, pretty hair, a sparkling smile, and twinkling eyes. She loved to venture outside on sunny days. On cloudy days, Susanna would telephone her best friends to join her for a delightful afternoon tea party inside the house. They would set a table with their best china and invite some of their dolls and teddy bears to be their guests. They would act like ladies and pretend to sip their tea and have a clever discussion. Having guests at her tea party pleased Susanna.

"One lump or two?" she asked the teddy bear seated to her right one afternoon. The teddy bear asked for two. "Lemon with that?" she asked. The bear didn't want lemon. Susanna's friends, Elizabeth and Brenda, helped her serve the guests. After finishing their tea, the teddy bears and dolls got sleepy and took a nap. The young ladies began to discuss the events of the afternoon.

"Oh, that bear can be so silly," said Elizabeth. "He never sips his tea. He always slurps it."

"And Miss Debbie," said Brenda. "She never brings anything for the tea party. In fact, I'm not sure who invites her."

Susanna leaned over to her friends and whispered, "I think she hears about it from Mr. Bear and invites herself."

Just then, Susanna's mother came to the tea party and said, "Susanna, there is a little girl at the door. Her name is Shelly. Why don't you invite her to play too?"

"Oh, Shelly," said Susanna. "Shelly is quite a bother. She just wouldn't fit in with our tea party, Mother."

Elizabeth turned up her nose and said, "Not the right type." Brenda agreed with Susanna and Elizabeth.

Susanna's mother frowned and said, "Young lady, I did not teach you to treat people so rudely. You must love and accept all people. You should be kind to Shelly."

The three girls felt bad. They were treating Shelly the way they treated Miss Debbie. They agreed to invite Shelly to play with them.

Shelly became one of their best friends, and they started remembering to invite Miss Debbie to all of their tea parties.



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