

One of the reasons Becky loved traveling on the weekends to her grandparents' house in Connecticut was her Grandpa Bob. As soon as she and her parents pulled into the winding drive and stopped in front of her grandparents' house, she and Grandpa Bob would go for a walk.

Becky lived in New York City in an apartment she shared with her parents and a golden retriever named Ralph. She and Ralph walked in the city, and she saw lots of interesting things. They saw yellow taxicabs, men in suits, and women in high heels. But never in New York did she see the fantastic things she saw with Grandpa Bob on their walks.

Grandpa Bob knew just about everything there was to know about the forest and the animals that lived there. Once, when she and Grandpa Bob were walking, a blue bird landed on his shoulder. When it flew away, Becky remembered her grandpa had looked down at her and winked.

"It was just telling me some secrets, that's all, Becky," he had told her. "That bird just told me there would be a frost tonight and that there is a herd of deer nibbling on grass just beyond those maple trees."

Becky followed with her eyes where her grandpa was pointing and saw a pelt of brown fur and the long legs and the velvet nose that did indeed belong to a white-tailed deer.

She couldn't believe a blue bird was smart enough to tell her grandpa all that. At the same time, she wished one of those critters would land on her shoulder and sing secrets to her.

Later that evening, when Grandpa Bob was dozing in front of the fire with his pipe hanging out of his mouth and Becky and her mom and dad were playing a game of cards with Grandma, Becky leaned in close to her mom and whispered in her ear.

"When I grow up Mom, I think I'm going to be like Grandpa Bob."

I was terrified. When my mom climbed out of the car and started walking toward the dentist's office, I stayed where I was, shivering in the front passenger seat of our car. Then, on a stroke of pure genius, I hit the button on the side control panel that locked all the doors on the vehicle at once. I wasn't going in there. I didn't care if I had crooked teeth for the rest of my life. Do you know what they do to you in dentist offices?

I found out last night while talking on the telephone with my best friend Marcy, who got braces last year. She told me that first they strap you down in the chair, and then they whip out the drills they've been hiding behind their backs. They have to SCREW on each brace, and they only give you the tiniest bit of painkillers. Then they get out the metal wires and tighten and pull to their hearts' content.

Marcy also told me her dentist, Dr. Pane, pulled so hard all of her teeth fell out. She told me it had taken Dr. Pane five hours to glue her teeth back in place. I think Marcy may be stretching the truth a little, but I know some of what lies ahead of me will, no doubt, cause me great bodily harm.

My mom raps sharply on the window.

"Let's go, Gloria," she says.

I get out of the car because she has the keys in her purse anyway, and I don't want to look like an idiot because my mother had to carry me over her shoulder kicking and screaming to get my braces put on.

"You know you're very lucky," my mom tells me as we walk up the sidewalk. "I wanted braces when I was your age, but I couldn't have them."

I don't say anything.

My mom pulls open the door and then steps aside letting another woman and her son walk out. The boy smiles at me. His teeth are strapped with metal.

I pinch my lips over my tilted teeth, blushing. I can't wait until I get my braces on.

The land outside the hunting grounds of Black Raven’s tribe was beautiful and filled with wild game and tall trees. Unfortunately, no one would brave the rapids of the Silver River to get to it. As a result, Black Raven’s family and friends were running out of food.

The Silver River twisted through a mountain pass on the edge of the tribe’s territory. The stone cliffs of the mountain pass were sharp and steep, and no one could climb them. The only way out of the valley was on the river, but sadly, no one was daring—or reckless—enough to brave the untamed water.

Many young men in the tribe boasted that someday they would ride the river to the other side of the mountains and into the fertile valley. They bragged around the campfires as they ate the last of the silver trout from the Silver River.

One evening the old wise man of the tribe interrupted the young men’s talk and spoke. "The time has come," he said, "for someone to journey beyond our lands. Who is brave enough to ride the river?"

Many of the young men around the fire jumped up without thinking. Some of them couldn’t even swim, but they raised their hands just the same and shouted out that they would surely beat the river and become heroes.

Black Raven was the only young man to stay seated. He thought quietly as the other men strutted and swaggered. He thought about what kind of vessel he would need to float on top of the water and avoid the sharp rocks of the rapids, and as he thought, he reached out and fingered the silvery bark of one of the birch trees nearest to him. He peeled a bit off the tree and thought it just might work.

"What of you, Black Raven?" one of the arrogant boys called out. "Are you too frightened to take on the river?"

"No," Black Raven said as he stood. "I think I have an idea that might work. Come, let us sit and think this over."

There was a cave in the forest not far from Scarlett's house. Weeds and brambles half blocked the opening to the cave, but the local kids still knew where to find it. They gathered there on summer evenings before the sun set and dared each other to go inside. So far, no one had been daring enough to enter because they knew caves were dark and dangerous.

Scarlett, like the other children, was wary of the cave. But the cave also made her curious because she'd heard that bats often lived inside caves. She'd also heard that pirates sometimes hid their treasure in caves. "Maybe," she thought, "there is pirate treasure in the cave in the forest. Maybe if I am brave enough to go inside I'll find a treasure chest waiting for me filled with diamonds and rubies."

After many days, Scarlett talked her best friend, Millie, into helping her look for treasure in the cave. One evening they ventured into the cave with a set of lanterns.

"Don't be frightened, Millie," Scarlett whispered outside the cave. "Don't you want to be rich? There's pirate gold in there, Millie. I just know there is. We could both be wearing ruby earrings in school tomorrow."

Millie looked into the dark cave. Even though she was holding a lantern, she couldn't make out the depth of the cave. She'd tried to talk Scarlett out of this adventure, but she knew it was no use. When Scarlett had her mind set to do something, she did it.

Millie followed quietly behind Scarlett as she entered the cave. After walking about a hundred feet, Scarlett suddenly wobbled and pitched forward. Millie caught her around her waist just in time. The girls looked down and saw they were standing at the edge of a large hole. After that scare, they gave up and headed out of the cave. Once they were both safe and out in the open again, Millie sighed with relief.

"So much for pirate's treasure," Millie said.

"I do like this purple rock I found, but I don't think it was worth the trouble," Scarlett replied.

Late one afternoon, Patrick O'Connor was walking home from school when a strange thing happened. His usual route home took him through a dark tunnel and high along some cliffs near an ocean. He saw nothing in the tunnel that amazed him. He didn't see anything strange as he walked along the cliffs above the wild waters. But just as he turned down the lane that led to his grandmother's cottage, a strange sight caught his eye.

It was a fairy sitting cool as a cucumber on a corner fence post. Patrick stopped, closed his eyes, rubbed them, and then opened them again. The fairy was still sitting on the fence post, and now she was staring at him. The tiny, shimmering woman was the most beautiful creature Patrick had ever seen. She had long, glossy hair and wings like a butterfly.

"I've been waiting for you all afternoon, Patrick O'Connor," she said. "What took you so long to walk home from school?"

"I didn't know anyone was waiting for me, so I had no reason to hurry," Patrick stammered.

"That's an honest answer," she told Patrick. Then she stood up and flapped her pretty wings. Before Patrick realized what was happening, she'd already landed on his shoulder and propped her elbow on his ear.

"Patrick O'Connor," she whispered. "Did you know your grandmother was friends with the fairies in these parts?"

"No, I did not know that," Patrick replied. "What do you want with me?"

"Well, now that you and your family live in your grandmother's house, the fairies want to be your friends as well. I was the one chosen to speak with you. Has anyone ever told you that you have your grandmother's eyes?" Patrick blushed and shoved his hands in his pockets as the fairy smiled kindly at him.

"I must go now, but we will speak again very soon," the fairy said as she blew him a kiss and disappeared.

When Maggie Ray's mother told her they would visit Mrs. Zale at teatime next Thursday, Maggie Ray said she wasn't going. Mrs. Zale lived in the big house on the corner of the block. Mrs. Zale's yard was filled with dead trees and surrounded by a tall, spiked fence. The curtains over Mrs. Zale's windows were never pulled open, and her house was always dark at night. Mrs. Zale didn't seem to have any visitors except the mail carrier when he delivered her mail.

On Wednesday, Maggie Ray cornered the mail carrier. "What's Mrs. Zale like? I'm supposed to go to her house on Thursday for tea, and I need to know."

The mail carrier smiled at Maggie Ray. "Don't tell me you've never met Mrs. Zale. You've lived down the street from her for over a year."

"Well I haven't," Maggie Ray said. "But I have to meet her tomorrow. Do you think you could tell me a bit about her?"

"Oh, no," the mail carrier said. "Mrs. Zale will want you to be surprised."

When teatime rolled around the next day, Maggie Ray's mother had to drag Maggie Ray up the sidewalk to Mrs. Zale's front door.

"I don't want to go in there," Maggie Ray panted. "Please don't make me go in there."

Before Maggie Ray could escape from her mother's grip, the front door opened. Maggie Ray's eyes nearly fell out of her head when a monkey in a red velvet vest opened the door. The monkey squawked at Maggie Ray and her mother and pointed them toward the dining room.

The dining room held another surprise. A parrot was sitting on the chandelier.

"Hello, hello, hello," he said as they walked into the room. "Would you like cream or sugar, cream or sugar?"

Maggie Ray couldn't believe her eyes. A silver tea service was laid out on the dining room table. There were trays of cookies, tarts, candies, and chocolates.

"Welcome, welcome," said the old woman who stepped into the room. She was dressed in an emerald ball gown. "I'm so glad you could make it, Maggie Ray." Mrs. Zale really was full of surprises!

Tad didn't pay much attention to the goldfish in the crystal bowl on his dresser. Most mornings he just tapped a bit of food into the bowl and went to school. He never talked to his pet. He never admired the fish's golden scales or delicate fins and tail, and he didn't notice the skillful way in which the fish swam circles in the water.

One day Tad was feeding his fish and thinking about the monster movie he planned to see that evening, when the fish spoke to him.

"Hey," the fish gargled, "you're dumping too much food into my bowl. Watch what you're doing, foolish boy!" Tad was so surprised he dropped the container of fish food on the floor.

"No," he said to himself as he shook his head. "It isn't possible for my fish to speak to me because fish don't talk. This kind of thing only happens in monster movies, not in reality."

"This is happening to you," the fish proclaimed. "I'm a goldfish, and I'm speaking to you, young man. You've ignored me since the day you got me. For one thing, the water in this bowl is too cold. Just dip your finger in it, and test it yourself. I don't know how I've survived under these cruel conditions."

Of course, the water in the bowl wasn't too cold for the goldfish, but how was Tad to know? How was Tad to know that his goldfish was not an ordinary fish, and as soon as he dipped his finger into the water, he would trade places with the goldfish?

Tad stuck his finger in the water and found it was cold, but not freezing. "It feels just fine to me," he tried to say, but no sound escaped him. Tad was now trapped in the fishbowl, and the goldfish had become a little boy. Tad swam around the fish bowl frantically, but when he tried to speak, only bubbles came out of his mouth. He watched his fish, who was now a boy, move around his bedroom.

"I think I'll try to see one of those monster movies you mentioned," he told Tad. "Goodbye, Tadpole."

Laura was very excited that there were only three days of school this week. The long weekend was going to be great because Laura was going to stay with her grandma and grandpa. She always liked to stay with them because it was so much fun.

Mrs. Stevens gave a spelling test on Wednesday morning, but Laura could hardly think because she kept imagining what she was going to do after school. She needed to pack her clothes in her new black suitcase. She also needed to bring her favorite book because each night everyone would sit by the fireplace and read. Finally, she couldn't forget Mrs. Mouse, her favorite stuffed animal, who had slept next to her in bed since she was little.

By the afternoon, Laura had an even harder time listening to her teacher. Laura thought about other nights at her grandparents' house. She knew that she'd have to be in bed before 8:30, even if it wasn't a school night. She also remembered the rule to eat ALL your vegetables. Still, most of the differences were fun. Grandma would always let Laura rent a movie and eat popcorn on the couch. Better yet, Laura would be able to hear stories about things HER dad had done when he was a kid. Best of all, Grandma would ask her how she felt about different things, and Laura would always feel safe talking.

That night, when Laura's dad dropped her off at Grandma's, he surprised Laura by picking her up after he'd grabbed the black suitcase. He teased her by saying the suitcase was heavier than she was.

"Have a super weekend, Peanut," he said as he rang the doorbell. "I wish I didn't have to work out of town, but I do. Have a great time, and I'll see you Sunday night."

Grandma opened the front door and gave Laura a big hug. Grandpa took her suitcase and carried it upstairs pretending like it was heavy. Laura heard popcorn popping in the microwave. She looked at the coffee table and saw the movie she wanted to see about a girls' basketball team.

"Yes," thought Laura. "This weekend is going to be great!"



One day Addie was collecting seashells in the surf when the flash of a fish tail caught her eye. At first Addie thought she'd seen the tail of a really small whale, so she backed away. Suddenly, a woman's head popped up out of the water, and Addie saw that the tail belonged to a mermaid.

The mermaid had tangled green hair. She had webbed skin between her blue fingers and gills behind her ears. The scales on her tail were silver and green.

Addie was so surprised she dropped her seashells. Her mother had always told her that mermaids didn't exist.

"Do not be frightened of me," the mermaid said. "I'm the last of my kind living in these waters, and I'm terribly lonely. Would you like to come under the water with me? I'll give you a tour of the ocean."

Addie knew that she probably shouldn't go with the mermaid, but her curiosity was too fierce. Soon she found herself chin deep in the sea with the mermaid splashing beside her.

"I don't think I should go under the water," Addie said. "I don't have gills behind my ears like you do."

"Just hold my hand tightly, and everything will be all right," the mermaid replied. Then she took Addie's hand and dove under the water.

At first Addie panicked as the green waves swirled around her. But she quickly realized the mermaid was telling the truth. As long as Addie held onto her hand, she could breathe under water and swim like a fish.

"Come on now," the mermaid told Addie. Her voice sounded eerie under the water.

The mermaid gave Addie a tour of the coral reef, and they swam with a colony of harmless jellyfish. They even rode on the back of a giant sea turtle. When Addie finally let go of the mermaid's hand and waded out of the water, the sun was setting and she could hear her mother calling for her.

"Thanks," Addie said.

"Any time, friend," the mermaid replied, and with a flash of her tail, she was gone.

Randy was a raccoon, and he loved to act on stage. He was preparing an animal talent show. Randy scurried throughout the forest talking to the animals of the woods. He wanted each animal to perform one act in the animal talent show.

Soon the big night came. All the animals of the forest showed up for the performance. Randy organized the performers, and the first one to perform was Gretchen the goose.

Gretchen walked out on stage and said, "Thank you all for coming tonight. I've prepared a special song I would like to sing for you." She took a deep breath and honked. She honked and honked and honked. It did not sound very good, but it was the best that Gretchen could do. She bowed when she was finished, and all the animals clapped politely.

"Borris, you're next," said Randy. Borris the bear shyly walked out on stage staring at the floor.

"Uh, I am going to dance," said Borris. The bear danced a little, shuffling his feet back and forth. He soon forgot his shyness and began to really enjoy himself. He stood on his back feet and danced backwards and forwards. He turned around in a circle. He jumped from one foot to the other. The animals cheered and whistled. Borris' dance was really quite good.

Sue the songbird was up next. She sang a beautiful solo. Her performance was perfect, thanks to all her years of practicing. The animals sat in awed silence until she finished.

Robert the rabbit performed a play in which he acted as if a fox was hunting him. First he ran away, then he ran back, and then he acted as if he was hiding in a hole. The animals clapped, but they were too scared by the drama to enjoy it.

Randy the raccoon was the last one to perform. He performed a wonderful drama about a king who was looking for a queen. The audience laughed and cried. The animals loved Randy's performance. They clapped and requested another performance.

"Please come to the next animal talent show, and you will see more," said Randy. All the animals of the forest left the talent show looking forward to the next performance.

Mr. Shrunk worked as a filing clerk at the telephone company. All day long he filed names, names, and more names. Mr. Shrunk thought his job was probably the most boring job on the planet.

One day, Mr. Shrunk could not take it any longer. Even though he was in the middle of organizing a huge stack of folders, he stood up, put on his jacket, and walked out the door.

"That's the last I'll ever see of that place," he said to himself as he climbed into his car and drove home. "Now I need to find myself a new and more exciting job."

The next morning over a bowl of chocolate crunch cereal, Mr. Shrunk reviewed the classifieds in the daily paper.

"It looks like they need help at both the police station and the fire station. I'll apply at both places," he said to himself. Mr. Shrunk finished his cereal, changed out of his pajamas and slippers into a suit and tie, and went out to look for work.

First, he stopped at the police station, where he got the chance to ride around with a pair of police officers in their squad car. An hour later, Mr. Shrunk decided dodging bullets and high-speed chases were not for him.

At the fire station, the firemen asked Mr. Shrunk to climb five stories of ladders and then slide down the long fire pole. Since he was afraid of heights and burning objects, he left the fire station without a job.

The next morning, Mr. Shrunk reviewed the classified ads yet again. He was about to set aside the paper when an ad on the far corner of the page caught his attention.

The ad read, "Brave stunt man wanted for dangerous stunts in a feature Hollywood film." The ad said the studio was looking for a tall man with a medium build and a mustache. The ad also gave the number to call if interested. Mr. Shrunk stood up.

"I'm tall," he said. "I have a medium build and a mustache." He marched across his kitchen and picked up the telephone. Mr. Shrunk was sure tomorrow he would start a new job.

Old Mr. Jenkins was digging around in his flower garden one afternoon when his hoe hit something solid. He put down the hoe and picked up a shovel.

"It must be one of those pesky rocks again," he told his cat, Virginia, who was always watching him. "When will I get rid of all of the rocks in my garden? I've been digging up rocks for more than fifty years."

"Meow," Virginia said as she watched Mr. Jenkins turn and start digging.

The rock that Mr. Jenkins hit with his hoe was long and narrow. It was soft, brown in color, and had two rounded ends. At first Mr. Jenkins thought he was digging up a petrified log. Soon though, he realized he was digging up a fossilized bone.

"Good heavens!" Mr. Jenkins exclaimed when he'd finally unearthed the bone and saw how huge it was. "What do you make of this thing, Virginia?"

Virginia, the cat, leaped gracefully down into the hole Mr. Jenkins just dug.

Mr. Jenkins could tell Virginia was thinking as she paced the length of the bone. Finally, Virginia stopped. She jumped out of the hole and stopped five feet across the lawn from it. She began to dig another hole with her furry paws.

Mr. Jenkins was about to scold Virginia because she was digging in the middle of his tulip patch, but he was curious. Instead of hollering, he picked up his shovel and went to help.

An hour later, Virginia and Mr. Jenkins dug up another bone. This bone was the skull of a dinosaur. It was as big as Mr. Jenkins' lawn mower and had rows and rows of sharp teeth. The teeth were the same size as the blade on Mr. Jenkins' hoe. When Mr. Jenkins saw the skull, he set it down carefully and walked into his house. From his kitchen, he used the telephone and called the local museum.

"I've got something out in my garden I think you'll want to see," he told the scientist who answered the phone. "Bring shovels!"

Theodore was an actor in movies. He was not a big movie star, but he did like to act. He was called an extra. You see extras acting in movies all the time. Just look at all the people walking down a street in a movie scene. Those people are all extras. When you watch a movie and see people standing around in the background, you are watching the extras at work.

Theodore's last acting job was to play a police officer in a big Hollywood movie. Before beginning work, Theodore needed to put on some makeup. In the movies, women and girls aren't the only ones who wear makeup. A makeup artist helped put the makeup on Theodore's face. The makeup made him look good on film. Then Theodore had to put on a costume. His costume was a police officer's uniform. When he wore the costume, he looked just like a real police officer. Even though he wasn't really a police officer, he sure looked like one. He even had a gun in his holster. The gun wasn't real and it couldn't fire bullets, but it did look real enough for a movie.

Once Theodore was ready, he had to wait. He waited while the cameramen moved their cameras into place. He and the other actors waited for the director to tell them where to stand and what to do. The director told Theodore to jump out of the way when the star of the movie rode by him on a horse. He would have to be careful so the horse wouldn't run into him.

"Action!" yelled the director. The actors started performing. Theodore did everything the director told him to do. He acted like a police officer, and when the star rode by on the horse, Theodore jumped out of the way. Theodore was a good actor, but he wasn't really acting this time. He really did need to jump out of the way of the horse! Theodore and the other actors worked all night to make the scene just right. When the movie was finished, it was fun for Theodore's friends and family to see him on the big screen.

I wasn't very excited as my mother and I pulled into a parking lot filled with potholes in front of a weather-beaten building. Through my smudged glasses, the building appeared very dull. Behind the building, I could see the ocean tossing and I wished my surprise was an ocean outing. I'd rather stroll along the seashore any day than do whatever my mom planned to do in that dreary building. But before I could turn to complain to my mother, she'd already climbed out of the car.

"Great," I said, slamming the car door and taking my time as I followed her.

The building was about as spectacular on the inside as it was on the outside. There was a dumpy desk stacked with papers, a telephone ringing off the hook, and a row of empty chairs. I didn't see anything more interesting than a thick oak door and some dusty sailing equipment. There were piles of rope and rigging everywhere. Suddenly my mother was nowhere in sight. I couldn't imagine what kind of surprise this deserted office could produce. "I can see this is going to be an exciting day," I muttered to myself.

"Are you Jesse?" asked a voice. A young woman stood on the far end of the office. "Your mother asked me to make sure you could find your way. Everyone is already outside." Curiously, I followed the woman across the threadbare carpet to the rear of the building.

The woman yanked the door open, and we stepped out, blinking in the sunshine. Before me was the smell of the sea, a stretch of beach, and a gorgeous ship bobbing on the waves. My mom was already on board.

"What exactly was going on here?" I wondered to myself.

My mother must have felt me watching her, because she spun around and started waving her arms at me. She was beckoning me down the dangerous-looking dock toward the impressive ship.

"Surprise, Jesse!" she shouted. "Do you want to go whale-watching with me? Captain Jones tells me that a pod of humpback whales was just spotted feeding outside the bay. Hurry up, lazybones!"

I couldn't think of anything sarcastic to say to that. In fact, I was so excited that I skipped down the beach toward the boat. I guess my mom knew how to surprise me after all.

Traveling is a lot of fun. Sometimes I travel so I can learn, and sometimes I travel just because I like to see different things. Sometimes I travel just to have fun and to keep from being bored. I have enjoyed traveling to ten different countries. Each country offered different and exciting things to see and do.

One of the most interesting countries I visited was Japan. Things are very different in Japan than they are in the United States of America. For example, the Japanese people speak Japanese, not English. They eat raw fish and rice instead of pizza. Some people wear robes instead of suits. The people in Japan are very kind and thoughtful, but it is hard to understand their customs.

France is another country that was fun to visit. The capital of France is Paris. Paris is a beautiful city with many interesting things to see. I saw the Eiffel Tower, one of the most famous buildings in the world. One of the biggest museums in the world is also in Paris. It is home to some of the most famous paintings in the world. The food is very good in France. They make good cheese and pastries. If you ever have a chance, you should go to France.

Ukraine is another country which is very different from America. The people in Ukraine do not all have cars or new clothes, and their food is a little different from our food. But the people are very loving and fun to know. They are very kind to visitors from the United States. If you go to Ukraine, try as much of the good food as you can.

Mexico is also a fun country to visit. In Mexico City, you can speak Spanish and eat churros. In the coastal areas, you can swim in the ocean. There are many things to buy in Mexico, like blankets, pottery, and clothing. Many people from the United States visit Mexico because the two countries are so close together.

If you ever have a chance to travel, do not pass up the opportunity. You can have great adventures in other places.

Thelma's new neighbor was mighty odd. She knew her neighbor was strange from the moment the moving van pulled into the driveway of the house across the street. She knew he was different just as soon as she saw him walk up to the front door of his new house.

Thelma wanted to walk across the street and introduce herself, but her new neighbor's costume made her stop and stare. The man wore shiny black boots that came to his knees and a black top hat. He had a mustache that curled up at the ends and a peculiar sparkle that lit his chocolate brown eyes. Thelma watched as he threw open his front door, took a moment to look inside, and then abruptly swung around and walked back to the moving truck parked in his driveway.

"Well, come on," he shouted. "Make yourselves at home!"

Then, to Thelma's complete surprise, a gang of clowns stepped out of the back of the truck. A troupe of monkeys and many more exotic animals followed the clowns. Thelma saw a pair of zebras, a bearded lion, and a very large tiger. She gasped when she saw a mama elephant and her tiny baby.

"How could the circus be moving in across the street?" Thelma asked herself. "What would she and the other neighbors do about the noise that would surely be caused by their new neighbor with all his animals?"

Thelma stayed at home and sat by the telephone, waiting for her neighbors to call and complain about the new neighbor. She sat for hours but no one called. She could hear loud music and the sound of wild animals coming from the house across the street. Still, no one knocked on her door to ask her if she was annoyed with the noise.

At one o'clock in the morning, the phone rang. The voice on the other end had an Irish accent.

"Hi. I'm you're new neighbor," said the voice. "I'm having a party. All your friends are already here. Would you like to join us?"



Fifth grade was my favorite year of school. My classmates were intelligent and fun, and our teacher, Mrs. Norton, was the best teacher in the school. She made everything fun. She turned learning into an interesting activity.

For example, Mrs. Norton created something called the Link-Up Program. For every book a student read, he or she was given a paper link to add to the chain of links taped to the wall in the hallway. If our class read enough books to stretch the chain all the way around the school, she would reward us with a big party at the end of the year. To get us started at a good pace, she offered another reward. The boy and girl who read the most books by October first would get to go out for lunch with Mrs. Norton. Guess what? I read the most books, so Mrs. Norton took my friend, Kim, and me to a hamburger place for lunch.

Another interesting reward Mrs. Norton used was called the Chocolate Factory. If a student did an outstanding job on his or her homework assignment, he or she would go to the Chocolate Factory. The Chocolate Factory was a wooden box in the shape of a little white house. When you opened the house by lifting the roof, you could see all of the chocolate and other candy that filled the house. A student could use one hand to grab as much candy as he or she could carry back to his or her desk. If any candy fell on the floor, it went back into the house. When I was rewarded with a trip to the Chocolate Factory, I thought about how I could get the most chocolate. I dipped my hand in like a scoop and filled it with candy. Then I carefully carried the candy back to my desk. I had enough candy to share with my friends.

Mrs. Norton was a very patient and kind teacher. She always made learning more fun and rewarding. I will never forget my fifth grade class and all the fun we had. Thank you, Mrs. Norton!

Molly tried to sleep, but she couldn't. Every time she closed her eyes and tried to snuggle her pillows, she would remember that tomorrow it would be her turn to stand up in front of the class, in front of EVERYONE, and give her speech.

Molly couldn't help it, she was nervous. Tonight when her mom tucked her into bed, she folded the covers around Molly more snugly than usual.

"I know you're nervous because of your speech tomorrow, Molly, but you really have nothing to be scared of."

Molly couldn't speak, so she nodded instead. Her mom didn't really know what Molly was so nervous about. Her mom was thirty-five years old, not eight years old and in fourth grade like Molly.

She didn't know that Michael O'Connor sat in the front row of Molly's class. She didn't know that whenever a girl got up to give her speech, he made funny faces and stuck his tongue out at her.

What if Molly stood in front of the class tomorrow and found she couldn't speak? What if she blushed until she was as red as a beet? What if her eyes popped out and rolled between the aisles to the teacher's desk? What if everyone laughed at her?

Molly's speech was about the lions in Africa. It was about how they lived in families called "prides" and how lionesses did all the hunting. What if nobody cared about lions?

Molly didn't remember falling asleep. She must have slept because the next time she opened her eyes it was morning and time to go to school. Even though she was more than a little bit scared and so nervous she could only eat half her cereal, she still went.

When it was time for Molly to give her speech, the whole classroom suddenly got quiet. Molly went to the front of the room, her hands trembling. There was Michael O'Connor crossing his eyes. Molly looked at him and then looked away.

"Lions live in Africa," Molly said and went on with her speech.

Fall is my favorite season. I love to watch the leaves change color and flutter to the ground on crisp autumn days. The cooler temperatures seem to beg for some kind of fire, either in a fireplace or, better yet, in a fire pit outside.

One of my favorite memories happened around a campfire last October. My cousins had come to visit, and we spent the afternoon at a state park. As it was already starting to get dark, everyone walked down the path to the beach, where we had set up a pile of wood for the fire.

"Isn't someone going to light the fire before it's too dark to see anything?" asked Uncle Matt.

"We were waiting for you to do it," replied my mom. "You are the fire expert after all." Because Uncle Matt was a firefighter, we had all assumed that he would be the best candidate for getting our campfire going.

"Okay, then," Uncle Matt said, making an exaggerated show of rubbing his hands together in anticipation, flexing his muscles, and then rearranging the wood in the fire pit. "Did anyone remember to bring matches, or am I supposed to rub two sticks together?" he asked.

"Here," Mom said, handing her brother a box of matches. "We're too hungry to wait for you to demonstrate your caveman or Boy Scout talents."

The first match Uncle Matt struck against the strip on the box failed to light at all. The second match burned until it touched the wood and then immediately went out. We waited, breathless, hoping the wood had caught fire, but no such luck! "The third time's the charm," Mom said, encouragingly.

But Mom was wrong, the third time didn't work, nor the fourth, nor the twentieth. Uncle Matt huffed in exasperation and asked, accusingly, "What did you kids do to this wood? Spit on it?" He tried to sound angry, but the glitter in his eyes gave him away. Uncle Matt didn't take anything, except his job, seriously. After a pause, he offered his excuse. "Hey, being a firefighter means that I'm good at putting out fires, not at starting them." We all had to agree: he truly was the worst at getting a campfire going!

Once upon a time, in a small village called Bandion, there lived a boy called Samir. Samir had three roosters, and every morning they would say, "Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!" As soon as Grandma heard their call, she would get up and start her day. They would call again, and Grandpa would rise and begin his day. When they called for the third time, Samir and his father, mother, and brothers would wake up and get ready for the new day. Everyone in Samir's family depended on the roosters to wake them up in the morning. Samir loved his roosters very much and took excellent care of them.

One day, two of Samir's uncles came to the village to visit. They stayed for several days. The roosters would say, "Cock-a-doodle-do" promptly at the stroke of every hour. Samir's uncles were impressed that his family didn't need a clock, and they wished they each had one of Samir's roosters. On the last day of their visit, Samir's uncles convinced him to give them each a rooster. After all, he did have three roosters and one rooster should be enough. Each uncle picked a rooster and left for their home.

Samir stroked the rooster that was left behind. "You are all alone now," he said sadly.

The next morning, the lone rooster did not crow. Grandma waited and waited for it to call. When Grandpa finally got up and left for work, he was late. Everyone in the family got up late that day, and everyone was angry.

"Why didn't the rooster crow?" everyone asked. Samir understood. The remaining rooster was lonely and missed his friends very much. Samir decided to write to his uncles and beg them to return their roosters. Before he could finish his letters, there was a knock at the door. Both of his uncles had returned with their roosters.

"Take your roosters back," they said. "They did not crow this morning, and we were all late!"

Samir gathered his roosters into his arms and said, "You clever roosters. You planned not to crow if you were ever separated."

Beatrice hated books. Books were dusty and musty and filled with long, tangled sentences that made no sense—at least not to Beatrice. Books were heavy and clumsy and so boring that whenever Beatrice sat herself down and forced herself to read, she fell right to sleep.

One stormy evening, Beatrice was sitting in the library doing nothing when her mother looked in on her.

"Beatrice, darling," she said, "why don't you read a book?"

"All the books in here are boring," she told her mother.

"They are not," her mother replied. "Pick one of these books to read and give me a full report in the morning." Then she left, closing the door behind her.

Beatrice was so angry she kicked the wall and yelled twice. She yelled the first time because she'd stubbed her toe and the second time because a book had become dislodged from the shelf above and fallen on her head.

The book fell open on the floor at her feet. A few stray wisps of sparkling dust rose from its moldy pages, tickling Beatrice's nose and causing her to sneeze.

"Bless you."

The voice came from the shadows all around Beatrice. She heard a faint chuckle as she narrowed her eyes and looked from side to side. No one was there. Beatrice knew she was alone with the book, so who had spoken to her?

"I did, you fool."

The voice came again, louder this time, and Beatrice finally looked down at her feet realizing that it was the book that spoke. Beatrice tried to close the cover of the book with her toe.

"That won't work," said the book, now ruffling its pages because it was upset. "I don't like to be kicked. Books should be treated with respect. Let me show you something."

The book ruffled its pages once more, and a strong wind blew as the pages turned. Finally, the book stopped on a page with a picture of a trapdoor. The handle of the trapdoor gleamed.

"Go ahead," said the book. "Pull it open. A world of adventure awaits you, young Beatrice."

The Writers' Club was an interesting group of talented school children who loved to write. Their faculty advisor suggested an interesting project for them. Each of them would write one paragraph of a story that would be printed in the school newspaper. The suggestion was eagerly accepted by participants. Joanie, the sports star of the school, began the story. She wrote this paragraph:

"Judy sat in class and watched her friend's gym class play soccer. She wished so hard that she could be excused from class and play with them. Suddenly, her teacher saw her looking outside and said, 'Why don't you go and play with them?' Judy didn't sit there another minute. She grabbed her books and folders and ran out to the field. She joined the soccer team and immediately scored a goal. She was awesome!"

Next was Scott's turn. He was a fan of science fiction.

"Just as Judy scored the winning soccer goal, aliens beamed her aboard their ship and flew off. Two large alien guards came at her to seize her and throw her into a cell. Judy gave the two of them a swift kick to the shins and seized control of their ship. She flew back to her school and waved at the students below."

It was Jessica's turn next. She loved movies, so she wrote about them.

"Then Judy flew off to California. She flew the spaceship right past the Hollywood sign and landed at a movie studio. One movie director asked if she would fly her spaceship for him in one of his movies. She said, 'Yes, but only if I can have the starring role.' The director agreed."

Finally it was Stephen's turn. The faculty advisor asked him to end the story with a nice conclusion.

"But Judy was bored as a movie star and with the spaceship, so she returned home and went to bed. The next day at school all her friends asked her what happened. All she said was, 'I scored the winning soccer goal.'"

The story was published in the school newspaper, and the readers requested a sequel.

My name is Elmer, and I'm nearly six years old. Six years old is about 42 dog years, so it is a little embarrassing to tell you that I got lost at my age. Actually, I got lost because I listened to my kennel mate, Abby, who often gets us into trouble.

We traveled from Illinois to Michigan to see our owners' relatives. It was a long ride, and our owners did quite a bit of visiting when they arrived. I guess that's why we missed our long daily walk. When they let us out the next morning, Abby took advantage of the situation and started running. I impulsively followed her!

We were exploring a new neighborhood, and the next thing I knew, two black Labradors appeared and started sniffing me all over. Abby bolted towards the highway and left me to fend for myself. The labs' owner, who seemed mean at that moment, tried to control her noisy dogs. Finally, she placed her hands on her hips and firmly yelled, "Kennel!" I understood that word, so I ran into the kennel with the labs. I guess I wasn't supposed to go inside because she dragged me out by my collar.

The lady commanded me to sit. She read my tags and giggled. Then she asked a familiar but embarrassing question. "Elmer? What kind of name is that for a handsome dog like yourself?" She called my owners' number and left a message for them. My owners quickly returned her call and made arrangements to pick me up. She fed me some biscuits and called her office to say she'd be late. She offered me a portable kennel to sit in while my owners came to get me. My owners were happy to see me. They thanked the nice lady before she left for work.

Some people say it's a dog-eat-dog world out there, but I disagree. Especially when you are lucky enough to get lost near a kind dog owner. However, I know I was lucky, and I think I've learned my lesson. The next time Abby wants to go exploring, I'll remind her that there's no place like home.

One morning, a long time ago and faraway, Little Wolf's mother was hungry for some hearty stew, so she told her son to bring home a rabbit.

Little Wolf set off on his mission and soon came upon a rabbit. Before he could do anything, the rabbit turned and spoke to the wolf.

"Oh, please, don't make stew with me," the rabbit pleaded.

"How did you know I wanted you for stew?" asked Little Wolf.

"I know everything," replied the rabbit, looking both wise and scared at the same time.

"My mother is indeed hungry for stew," Little Wolf told the rabbit. "She sent me out into the forest to catch a rabbit and will be angry if I return empty handed."

"If you will spare me so I don't wind up in your mother's stew pot, I will use my special powers to give you good luck," the rabbit promised.

"Bah!" Little Wolf said. "We do not need luck. What we need is food." Still, even though Little Wolf was famished, he could not bring himself to capture the rabbit because she had spoken to him.

"Go on then, and I will get another rabbit," he said. Despite the good luck promised to him, Little Wolf returned that evening without anything for his mother's stew.

"What kind of a wolf are you?" his mother shouted at him. "A lazy one, that's for sure. Go down to the river and fetch some water. It's the least you can do, after failing to get even one small rabbit."

On the trail to the river, Little Wolf thought he caught a glimpse of the rabbit who had talked to him earlier that day, but it was too dark to be certain. When the wolf got to the river, he dipped his mother's jug into the current, only to pull it out and find a silver trout trapped inside. Little Wolf tossed the trout on the shore, dipped the jug in the water again, and immediately caught another fish.

"What luck!" Little Wolf said. "Maybe the rabbit really did have special powers." The wolf family had lots of trout stew for dinner, and Little Wolf enjoyed it immensely, finding it superior to rabbit stew.



Hundreds of years ago, in a land far away, an old man named Alexander rescued helpless children. Alexander had a very kind heart. He didn't want the children to go without food, clothing, or shelter. Alexander often drove his mule-drawn wagon around the town searching for homeless children to help.

On this particular day, Alexander drove his wagon through a very poor village. He saw a little boy and a little girl sitting in an alley. Their clothes were torn, and the children were very dirty. They sat close together and cried.

"Why are you crying?" asked Alexander from atop his wagon.

"Our mother and father have died. We have no family and nothing to eat," said the little girl.

"We are hungry," said the little boy. "Can you help us, Sir?"

Alexander told the little boy and girl to climb into his wagon. Alexander took the little boy and girl to his farm in the country. At the farm, they saw dozens of other children busy at work. Out in the field, young boys were cutting down hay. In the barn, young girls were milking cows.

"All of these children have lost their parents," Alexander told the little boy and girl. "We all work together so we can eat and keep the farmhouse clean. I find good homes with loving mothers and fathers for most of the boys and girls. I will find a good home for you too. But until we find a good home for you, I must teach you how to work so you can help us keep ourselves fed."

The boy and girl were more than happy to work. The little boy ran out into the fields to work with the other boys. The boys were kind and helpful. They taught the little boy how to use a pitchfork. The girl offered to help with the cooking and the dishes. The little boy and girl were very happy in their new home.

I must be the only ten-year-old kid in the universe who has a time-travel machine. I began to use it just yesterday. My time-travel machine has a wide variety of buttons. Yesterday I got in, closed my eyes, and pressed one of the buttons. When I opened my eyes and looked out, I found myself in ancient Egypt! I peered out the window and saw warriors running towards me. They looked angry, so I pressed a button that said "The Future" and quickly arrived back at my house.

I decided the time-travel machine was way cool and called my best friends, Jeff and Justin. I didn't tell them about the time-travel machine over the phone because I knew they wouldn't believe me. They always questioned the things I told them.

A few minutes later, I looked out my bedroom window. Sure enough, Jeff and Justin were walking up the driveway. "Hey," I said. "You guys have to see the time machine I found."

"You know we're too old for make-believe," Justin said as he folded his arms.

"No, I'm serious," I insisted, leading them to my machine. With their eyes wide open, they stood in complete silence. After a lot of questions, they convinced me they were ready to try it out. We crammed into the machine, and I randomly pressed one of the buttons. Suddenly we found ourselves in medieval England. Jeff and Justin were totally amazed. They couldn't believe their eyes! Just as we were about to step out, we noticed several knights in shining armor approaching. I decided not to chance it. I hit the future button, and we ended up safe and sound back in my home.

Jeff and Justin made me promise to take them on another adventure very soon. Hopefully, next time we will be able to stay longer and explore more of the past.