

I live in the tiny town of Peanut, Pennsylvania, in the second to the last house at the end of a dead-end road.

There isn't a whole lot to do in Peanut, but we do have a grocer, a baker, a hairdresser, a mechanic, AND an inventor.

It's Tommy O'Connor who put our little village on the map. He lives just down the road from me. His house is right before the dead end. A lot of people go back there, turning their cars around when they realize they're lost.

That's how he acquires many of his customers for his bizarre inventions. People pull onto our road, thinking it'll go on forever, but it doesn't. It stops dead in its tracks at Tommy's front door. That means booming business for Tommy.

Tommy has signs for his inventions posted in the ditches up and down our road and out on the freeway. Gigantic signs are nailed to telephone poles and dead tree trunks. They hang from tree branches and other people's mailboxes.

Tourists often stop at Tommy's house, and once they're there, they exclaim over his strange inventions. Then they pull out their checkbooks and spend big bucks.

Last spring, Tommy crossed his lawn mower with his snowmobile and used it to both clear snow and cut grass. Just a month ago, he found an old hot air balloon in the dump, hooked it up to his own car, and now he no longer has to fight traffic on the way to work. He transformed his wife's hairdryer into a miniature rocket engine and his son's computer into a toaster. Last week he attempted to sell me a calculator that he'd turned into a cell phone, but I had to refuse because we didn't need any more cell phones in the house.

He tuned up my car for me about a week ago. The repairs it required were simple—an oil change and a refill on windshield wiper fluid. When I got it back it could go from zero to ninety in a second flat and the radio could pick up stations from around the world.

The mountain and the river were bitter rivals. The mountain distrusted the river because of her sneaky creeks and streams that trickled down his flanks. The river distrusted the mountain because of his jutting peaks and the rolling boulders that blocked her course. The river was made to erode mountains, and the mountain was made to stand in the way of rivers.

Every day the river cut a cold path through one of the mountain's passes, and every day the path became deeper and wider. The river was carving a valley on the side of the mountain and this frightened the mountain, but he hid his fear with anger.

"You're cutting too close to my flank!" he shouted. "I wouldn't come too close if I were you. Any day I might choose to let an avalanche loose that will bury you beneath its rubble."

The river lent her ear to the mountain, but there wasn't much she could do to change her course because of her wild nature.

"There is nothing I can do to stop myself," she said. "I must follow the path laid out in front of me, and I dare say, if you let an avalanche loose on top of me, my waters will only bubble through it and continue on course. As big as you are, mountain, you cannot stop me, and I cannot stop myself. We are simply going to have to get used to one another."

"Rubbish!" cried the mountain, and in a fit of rage, he shrugged his shoulders and released an avalanche of rocks.

The rocks splashed into the river's cold depths, sinking to the bottom and impeding the water's flow. For a moment the river was still and confused, but then her nature took over and she started to move. She dodged the rocks and continued to rush down the mountain's flanks. Dangerous rapids formed. There was nothing the mountain could do to stop the river. The great mountain saw this fact and stilled his tantrum.

"Perhaps we should call a truce," he said, "for I cannot conquer you and you cannot conquer me."

Ms. Pringle was the strangest teacher at Eastbrook Elementary. Everyone agreed, including the students, teachers, janitors, and even the principal.

Ms. Pringle's laugh sounded like a cackle. Her hairdo was like a dust ball perched on the top of her head. It was frizzy and golden. She favored bright colors, and sometimes under the cuffs of her pants, her students saw that her socks didn't match.

One day, Sammy raised his hand and Ms. Pringle called on him.

"Ms. Pringle," Sammy said. "Do you know that your socks are mismatched and your shoes are untied?"

"Oh," Ms. Pringle said bending down hastily to take a look. "I guess you're right, Sammy. You see, I have better things to do than worry about whether my socks match or my shoes are tied."

On Thursday, Ms. Pringle came to class in slippers and the students were flabbergasted to see that her hair was still twisted in curlers. She had only one earring dangling from her left earlobe, but she wasn't the least bit worried when Tony pointed out the missing earring to her.

Ms. Pringle left the single earring in all morning. She taught the students how to divide during math class and about England and France during history class. She taught them how to make a cursive letter B. She also took all their pictures for a bulletin board she was decorating.

All day long she lost curlers. They rolled from her golden hair, off her desk, and down between the aisles where her students sat in wonder. By the end of the afternoon, her hair was one curly, untamed mess. But when Angie offered Ms. Pringle a barrette to clip it back, she declined.

"I have better things to do," she announced to her students. "Now, let's see. We were talking about squids."

"What better things do you have to do?" someone asked. Ms. Pringle looked up and smiled. A curler rolled between her feet.

"Why, teach you, of course," replied Ms. Pringle.

Looking at John Cobb standing next to his racers with his helmet on inspired me and my friend Marty to build our own go-cart. We were going to make history. We took a board from Dad's lumber pile. The board measured two inches thick by twelve inches across and eight feet long. Next we took apart my brother's wagon for its wheels and sturdy axles. To attach the wheels, we laid the axles on the board and drove 16-penny nails into one-inch centers on both sides. Then we bent them over the steel axle. We also built a seat out of an old orange crate.

Finally we had a basic go-cart. It was nothing fancy, but with a fine set of wheels, plenty of grease, and some kid-power or a good hill, she would fly!

We decided this machine would be a deluxe model, including steering. To achieve steering control, we concentrated the nails at the center of the front axle. You could accomplish a left or right turn by sitting on the board and placing your feet against the axle on both sides near the wheels and using a reasonable amount of pressure.

It was Marty's great idea to tie the go-cart to the white horse named Old Blue that grazed in the field across the street. When Marty introduced the horsepower idea, I became a little nervous. It didn't take long for me to suggest that he should be the first test driver.

We fastened a rope to Old Blue's neck, and Marty climbed aboard and tied himself in with a do-it-yourself seatbelt. Old Blue had no trouble pulling a piece of wood through the field of hay. Marty was determined to ride as far as he could. He was doing well until Old Blue jumped a ditch, sending the go-cart airborne. When it hit the ground on the other side of the ditch, the wheels came off completely.

When I reached Marty, he didn't look very good. It took me a few minutes to help him get out of the smashed go-cart. Luckily, Marty was able to walk home. I did not go with him though. I thought it would be best for Marty to explain what happened on his own.

I got the usual wake-up call from my mom at exactly 5:45 a.m. After I rested my eyes for what seemed like only a minute or two, she called to me again.

"You'd better be getting up right now or you'll be late!"

I slowly walked to the bathroom to take my morning shower, only to find a huge spider sitting on my washcloth! After a few minutes of taunting the spider, I managed to wash it down the drain.

My bug hunting efforts made me late for breakfast. I somehow managed to eat my cereal and make it to school on time. The day went fine until fifth period, when to my surprise, I discovered that an Air Force colonel was substituting for my English teacher. I spent the entire period in silence under the watchful eye of a Persian Gulf vet.

During sixth period, I remembered that I had detention for not finishing my math homework. I also remembered that I forgot to tell my mom about detention. I decided to give her the bad news by e-mail. I hoped the e-mail might soften her up. A phone call from my math teacher later that day, however, removed any sympathy my mother may have had for me. Detention seemed to drag on forever. I had homework to do but couldn't force myself to do it.

When I got off the late bus, I braced myself for my mother's wrath. I found her in the den, and to my surprise, she didn't yell as loud as I thought she would. After she was done yelling at me, she told me that my guitar lesson was canceled for the evening. I took some comfort in this news because I knew I could continue to torture her with the same annoying songs for another week.

Dinner went off without a hitch. I ate everything on my plate. After dinner I went to my room to catch my favorite TV show, only to discover that a special speech by the president's wife was on instead. I decided to go to bed early that night. I was glad the day was finally over!

On Thursday morning, the children in Mr. Randall's fifth grade class were very excited and difficult to control. Thursday was their field trip. Mr. Randall wiped the sweat off his forehead and smiled at his assistant teacher, Miss Peach, as all twenty-four students waited by the curb, clutching their brown-bag lunches and craning their necks to see the yellow school bus.

"Everyone in single file now. No pushing or shoving," Mr. Randall called to the students as they clambered into the bus like a herd of stampeding elephants.

Mr. Randall's students believed they were the luckiest class in the entire school because their field trip was more exciting than any other. Even some of the sixth graders agreed they were very lucky. Today Mr. Randall's class was going to the circus!

When the bus pulled in front of the circus tent, several students pressed their faces against the bus windows and exclaimed, "Wow!" Several others couldn't say anything at all. They were staring at the pair of lions a woman was leading around by a leash.

Once inside the tent, the students were so impressed with the surroundings that they listened to every word Mr. Randall said. When he told them to sit down, they sat down. When he told them to speak in whispers, they spoke in whispers for the rest of the show. No one threw spit balls. No one jumped out of their seats. The children in Mr. Randall's fifth grade class were, for once, perfectly behaved.

Mr. Randall glanced over at Miss Peach and winked.

"Happens to them every time," he whispered.

A bunch of clowns buzzed around in a pink car in the middle of one of the rings in the center of the tent, and the children's eyes opened as wide as saucers. Then fifteen clowns climbed out of the car, and the students clapped as loudly as they could. When it was time for the trapeze act, the students held their breath. When the elephants came out, they said, "Oh" and "Ah." On the bus on the way home, the students chatted excitedly about the circus. What a great field trip!

Books were everywhere, and Mrs. Tuttle, the person responsible for the books, was getting frantic. Her predicament started in October when she found the book supply running low.

Mrs. Tuttle was a very organized person. She ordered more books immediately, requesting that they be delivered by air. Air mail was always the speediest way to receive books. By November, it was obvious that someone messed up somewhere. She was sure she had not ordered this many books!

As usual, flocks of birds delivered the books. Mrs. Tuttle would find the birds gathered on the steps of her library in the morning. Each bird would flap its wings and remove the leather bound books tied to its legs by straps of ribbon. They would wait for her to unlock the doors with her skeleton key. Some days they were not patient, and they would peck holes in her socks. She would end up shouting, "Stop! I am moving as quickly as I can!"

Mrs. Tuttle was usually cool and composed, but now she was beside herself with worry. She did not have enough room in her library for this many books.

"That's it! I've had enough! Someone will have to call off these birds," Mrs. Tuttle screamed one afternoon. A flock of flamingoes with packs of dictionaries had just stumbled through the doors. She marched over to the telephone, dialed, and waited. She tapped her foot in annoyance.

"Hello, this is Mrs. Tuttle from the library. Someone will have to call off this multitude of birds. I have more than enough books."

"You can never have enough books," said the person who answered the telephone. The voice sounded different to Mrs. Tuttle, as if the speaker had a beak.

"I have stacks of books here taller than I am," Mrs. Tuttle huffed.

Just then a hummingbird fluttered by her shoulder carrying a tiny book of poems. Mrs. Tuttle gave the bird one of her sternest looks, but instead of flying away, the bird began to chirp and sing. Mrs. Tuttle sighed and slowly hung up the receiver.

"My, you're pretty," she told the hummingbird. "Can you help me straighten out this mess?"

Imaginary friends are good to have around. They come in especially handy when you're the new kid in class and everyone ignores you.

After I moved to Watercress, Indiana, nobody in my fourth grade class knew my first name was Jason for a week straight. The teacher even printed it in bold letters across the blackboard my first day in attendance. If I hadn't been best friends with Sigmund, I might not have made it through that trying first week at my new elementary school when everyone shouted, "Hey you!" to get my attention.

Sigmund is my imaginary friend. Only I can observe his antics. Sigmund has fuzzy, purple ears that stick out like teacup handles from both sides of his shaggy head. He also has a mouth filled with lots of sparkling white teeth. His paws are the size of trash can lids, but his eyes are thoughtful and gentle. Sigmund purrs when he is content, and he cries big, indigo tears when he is upset.

Although I am the only one who can see Sigmund, anyone can hear him. Even though he is a little shy, Sigmund does cause a commotion at times due to his large size. For example, if Sigmund knocks over a stack of books or trips over a desk, people near him would be able to hear the commotion he caused. Last week, Sigmund was dancing around in the front of the room while the teacher taught us how to divide. Suddenly he spun around and accidentally ran into the chalkboard. He caused a lot of anxiety when the other kids heard his loud crash but couldn't see him. Several students looked at each other and whispered, "What was that?"

The teacher told us it was probably only a minor earthquake and continued on with her lesson. Only I knew Sigmund was the cause.

Even now that everyone knows my first name is Jason and I have a group of friends my own age, I'm still friends with Sigmund. I just don't explain why I smile sometimes during the most boring classes.



After supper one evening, while Harry was exploring the forest, he came upon something extraordinary. A squirrel's nest that once rested snugly between the branches of one of the towering maples had fallen to the ground. It was tangled in a heap of broken branches and blackened leaves. Harry was ready for the worst as he cautiously approached the nest, but instead of a disaster, he got a surprise.

When he crouched down to inspect the abandoned nest, something brown and frizzy flew up in his face. It scrambled around his neck, raced down his back like lightning, and then shoved itself snugly in his pocket.

Harry thought about digging his hand into his pocket and pulling out the trembling creature, but he decided not to. The squirrel was obviously frightened. For whatever reason, it felt protected in Harry's pocket, so he let it stay there as he hiked home.

When he got home, Harry slammed the front door behind him and scrambled past his parents. He pounded up the spiral staircase to his quiet bedroom.

"Oh, I do wish you'd slow down and stop banging through the house," his mother shouted up at him.

"Sorry, Mom," Harry said half-heartedly over his shoulder as he shut and locked himself in his bedroom. As soon as he was alone, he reached gently into his pocket. He expected the squirrel to race out of his hand and hide under the bed, but instead the little critter just sat in Harry's palm and stared at him. The squirrel scrunched up its black nose and sneezed, and Harry laughed.

Harry's laugh must have frightened the squirrel because it flew out of his hand. It literally soared up to the curtain valance above his window and angrily chattered down at him. Then it fell from the valance and slipped between the dusty books Harry had on his shelf and looked for a place to build a nest.

To this day, Harry's mom still doesn't know her son keeps a flying squirrel for a pet, but she does often wonder why all the nuts and crackers in the house seem to disappear.

One night Jessie caught a jarful of lightning bugs and set them on her nightstand to use as a night light as she fell asleep. These lightning bugs weren't ordinary lightning bugs. Regular lightning bugs have neon green bubbles on the rear part of their bodies. These lightning bugs had miniature light bulbs that gave off a green glow. Regular lightning bugs have rather squinty black eyes and tiny brains. These lightning bugs wore black spectacles and had large brains. They all carried a little backpack on their backs filled with books and maps. Although they were trapped in a jar, they waited quietly for Jessie to fall asleep before they started to speak.

"What do you think she's doing over there?" asked one lightning bug named Rosy. "Do you think she's sleeping yet? I never realized humans have such gigantic eyebrows."

"Her breathing is slow and regular, so I'd say she's asleep," said another lightning bug named Billy.

"Oh, look, she's drooling," said a bug named Hester. "When we get out of here, let's trap her in a jar and see how she likes it."

Hester was by far the brightest lightning bug of the bunch.

"Come on, Hester," said Billy, as he helped the team of lightning bugs unscrew the lid of the jar. "Let's escape!"

Soon the lightning bugs were out of the jar and in the wide-open air of Jessie's bedroom. Some of the bugs quickly darted out of the window as soon as they got the chance, but Hester and Rosy lingered around Jessie's pillow.

"I wonder what she's dreaming about?" murmured Hester.

"She's probably dreaming about the kind of animal she wants to capture next time," said Rosy. "Why don't you wake her up and ask her, Hester?"

"Let's go. Let's go," prompted the other lightning bugs from outside.

"One moment," said Hester. She studied Jessie's ears and then pulled something out of her backpack. She gave Jessie a pair of neon green earrings and told her friends, "I want to give her something to remember us by because she didn't hurt us. She was only curious."

Michael enjoyed sailing on the sea more than anything else. The feel of the wind through his hair while it filled the ship's sails, the chop of the ocean beneath him, and the deep navy color of the waters were just some of the reasons for his love of the sea.

Michael remembered having a fascination with the sea. He grew up on the shores of the Atlantic in the state of Maine. From the moment he was old and strong enough to haul up a net, he was allowed to go on the boat with his father in the evenings.

Michael's great-great-grandfather had been a sea-faring captain. He had owned his own ship and made a run from the New York harbor to Southeast Asia and India every year. He'd brought back spices, the richest of silks, and teacups so fine you could see the tea through the china. Best of all, he'd brought back stories of his adventures on the high seas. Out of all his treasures, the stories were the most important. Only the stories remained intact as the years flew by.

On his eighteenth birthday, Michael inherited the old, silver compass that once belonged to his great-great-grandfather. The compass was tarnished and dented, yet amazingly, its silver arrow still pointed true north.

After his high school graduation, only one route of education interested Michael. He wanted to study the sea and its creatures. He hadn't realized, however, that there would be so many sea-related careers to choose from. He could be an oceanographer and study the vast oceans. He could be a marine specialist and study the characteristics of different marine animals. Or he could be a fisherman like his father and his father before him. Fishing was an occupation that went back for generations in his family.

Now, as a grown man with a boat of his own, Michael would sometimes find himself on the deck of his ship thinking of his life with the sea. It was then that he would slip the old compass out of the pocket of his wet slicker, study it under the stars, and remember just exactly where he came from.

The bright lights glaring down on the stage were making Holly sweat. It wasn't her nerves that had her hands all clammy, she told herself. It was just the heat in the auditorium.

She had been standing offstage for nearly an hour now, and her hands kept sweating more and more. Wiping them on her skirt didn't seem to be doing any good. She decided to try not to think about it and to take deep breaths instead.

Today was the day of Holly's first piano recital. It was being held in a huge auditorium with at least two hundred people present. The young man currently on stage was playing a sonata. He was almost finished, and Holly was next on the program. The thought of walking across the stage made her stomach lurch.

"Just calm down," she told herself. "You've practiced this piece a thousand times. You could play it in your sleep." Somehow this idea distracted her until the pianist before her left the stage and the applause died down.

Holly felt every eye on her as she walked shakily to the grand piano. The clicking of her heels across the stage sounded unbearably loud to her until she self-consciously sat down and placed her hands on the keys.

For a terrible moment, her mind went blank and panic threatened to overtake her. "I can't do it!" she thought. She felt like crying until she forced herself to take a deep breath, clear her mind, and begin to play.

Her fingers awkwardly played the first few bars, and her fingers felt numb, like little blocks of wood, clumsily clunking down on the keys. Then she hit a sour note.

Holly's back stiffened in shock, and suddenly her hands flew across the keys with a confidence born of sheer determination. The music swelled and ebbed and flawlessly came to an end.

Holly felt her whole body vibrate with the force of the enthusiastic applause that followed her performance. She smiled and bowed gracefully. Her earlier panic was completely forgotten.

Shelly and Ricky strolled down the aisle of the large, all-purpose store. They weren't looking for anything in particular and were in no hurry to find it. As they turned the corner into the paper aisle, Shelly saw a small coin purse lying on the floor. There was only one other customer nearby, so without looking inside the coin purse, Shelly asked the woman if it was hers. The woman quickly took a look at the coin purse and answered negatively.

The coin purse was small and had a zipper. It was the kind of purse a child would carry to the store. Thinking it was a child's purse, and hoping to find some identification inside, Shelly and Ricky unzipped the purse. Expecting to find nickels and dimes, they were totally surprised when Shelly pulled out two one-hundred-dollar bills and several ones!

If the purse held only coins, Shelly and Ricky would have turned it in without question. But holding two hundred dollars in their hands made them catch their breath and think again. All kinds of thoughts raced through their minds as they looked at each other with the money in their hands. There was no identification inside or out, so there was no way to prove who owned it. It would be very easy to walk out of the store with the money, and no one would know. They both wanted the money. They both needed the money. But they both knew it would be wrong to keep the purse.

When they went to the counter with their find, the cashier's amazement was apparent. She couldn't believe someone would turn in a lost purse with that much money. As Shelly gave her name and explained the situation, the cashier interrupted, saying, "A young woman reported this coin purse missing. She had just cashed her paycheck. She'll be so grateful for your honesty!"

As Shelly and Ricky left the store, their faces reflected their mixed emotions of pride and disappointment. They were sad they couldn't keep the money, but they also knew they had done the right thing.

The circus was coming to town, and everyone wanted to go to the show to see the spectacle. Tickets were hard to obtain because the show was practically sold out.

When Dad came home from the office, he said nothing about the upcoming circus. None of us kids suspected a thing as dad ate his dinner and watched the Monday night football game.

The football game rolled along, and the whole family watched the rivalry unfold. It was a good game. Suddenly, Dad got up from his chair, went to his coat, and pulled five little pieces of paper out of his pocket. He quietly handed us each a piece of paper. They were circus tickets!

"Next Saturday we will be going to the circus," he said. "It will be great."

Before we went, I imagined what we would see at the circus. First, we would park our car close to the colorful tents and walk to the very first mini-donut stand we could find. Mini-donuts are excellent and absolutely must be eaten at a circus. I heard it's a rule. Next we would walk to the colorful big top while eating our donuts. The circus smells would drift through the air and the scent of fresh popcorn would be overwhelming. There always was something new to see too. Going to the circus gave us a wonderful chance to be together.

On Saturday, we arrived at the circus! First came the clowns! One clown had a goofy nose. Moments later, a funny multicolored clown raced into the grandstand, took my dad's hat, and ran off with it. The clown went back into the center ring, tripping over the ring itself, and jumped into his little blue circus car. The car drove rapidly out of the ring and out of the circus tent with my dad's hat.

I looked at my dad. All my family could do was roar loudly with laughter. Everyone around us laughed hysterically because they all saw the clown steal my dad's hat. Shortly afterward, there was a tremendous ruckus by the other end of the tent and the car came in again. It went super fast and nearly hit an elephant on its way back to the center ring.

"Where is Dad's hat?" I wondered. The car stopped and out came one clown, then another, and then another. Fourteen clowns piled out of the car, and the last one that climbed out was wearing Dad's hat.

During a thunderstorm last November, a tree fell on our house and our roof collapsed. My dad isn't very good with house repairs, so we had to call a carpenter.

The day after the storm, my dad and I waited for the carpenter outside on our driveway. We were both tired after spending most of the night trying to save our belongings. Our house no longer had much of a roof, and it had rained all night.

After a few minutes, a white van with "Carlson's Carpentry" painted in red letters on its side-door panels turned into our driveway and coasted toward us. My father and I were wet, tired, upset, and about to be surprised.

The carpenter who climbed out of the white van wasn't at all the repairman we were expecting. Instead, an old woman stepped onto our wet driveway. Her hair was in curlers, and she had a pair of safety goggles resting on top of her head. She shook my dad's hand in a no-nonsense manner, and with a frown, she turned to look at our house.

"Now I see why you were in such a panic on the telephone," she said to my father. "This place needs some major work."

The tree that had fallen on our house was at least two hundred years old. Its branches and leafy sections had completely destroyed our living room and breakfast nook. I didn't believe for one second that this little old woman was going to remove the tree and reconstruct the walls of our house. I could tell my dad wasn't sure either. He stared at the old woman in her work boots and carpenter's pants. He was totally amazed.

"My name's Harriet Carlson," she told us. "But I only respond to Harry."

"Sure thing," my dad muttered.

"Now where's my chainsaw?" said Harry.

"Are you sure," my dad said following after her in his bathrobe, "that you should operate such heavy machinery, Mrs. Carlson?"

"That's Harry," she grunted as she hefted the chainsaw in one hand and stalked up the driveway. "No one's called me Mrs. Carlson since my teaching days. This here's my second career choice."

The rest of her words were lost in the roar of the chainsaw as we watched in disbelief as she started to work. From then on, I remembered that first impressions aren't everything.

Radcliff didn't like being a rat. He had gray fur with brown splotches and a limp, cold tail that was always getting slammed in doors. His left ear had been caught in a mousetrap, and only his right ear remained. Radcliff thought he would have a better life if he were a rabbit.

Radcliff wanted to be a rabbit so badly. Everyone knows rabbits have more fun than rats. Rabbits get pulled out of top hats. Rabbits have cute, wriggly noses and perfect ears. They have soft, downy coats and very fluffy cotton-ball tails too. They can hop, they star in beloved stories, and they appear in many more movies than rats.

One afternoon while down in his dingy, damp rat hole, Radcliff decided to transform himself into a rabbit. He made himself rabbit ears out of several sticks and an old white T-shirt that someone had thrown away. He also made himself a puffy, bunny tail out of old cotton balls. Then he climbed up out of his hole and went into the sunshine. Luckily enough, the first person Radcliff met while out on the sidewalk was a magician.

"Oh, what a lovely rabbit," the magician said as he bent down to stroke Radcliff's bristly back. "Why, you're just the rabbit I need to star in my magic show."

Radcliff was overjoyed when the magician picked him up and stowed him in his top hat. On stage later that evening, the magician pulled Radcliff out of his hat and received robust applause. Radcliff did a little tap-dancing number that brought down the house.

"You were wonderful," the magician told Radcliff after the show. "No one even realized you weren't a real rabbit."

Radcliff was heartbroken. He was sure the magician thought he was a real bunny. What if the magician intended to toss him out on the street and find himself an authentic bunny? Fortunately for Radcliff, that didn't happen. Instead, the magician made Radcliff dinner and they practiced magic tricks until midnight. When the magician was tucking Radcliff into bed, he smiled.

"Tomorrow we have another show," he said, "and I will be the only magician in the city with a magic rat."



One day, Victoria was walking home from the grocery store with a brown bag on each hip when a sparkle caught her eye. The sparkle came from a slightly dented ruby ring wedged tightly in a crack of the cement sidewalk. After much muttering and three scraped knuckles, she retrieved the ring and held it in the palm of her hand.

Some words were engraved on the inside of the ring's golden band, but the ring was so worn and bent that Victoria could not read them. Victoria slipped the ring on her thumb. Feeling quite content, she skipped all the way home. When she got there, her youngest brother Roger was waiting in the yard with a picture he'd colored for her.

"Why, you're so sweet, Roger," Victoria said patting her brother on the cheek as she spoke. She was about to say more, but there was a poof of smoke. When the smoke cleared, Victoria saw that Roger had turned into a sugar statue. Victoria stepped closer and saw that her brother was one solid piece of sugar crystal. Roger's mouth was open as if he wanted to speak. Just then, Victoria's other brother, Newman, came out onto the back stoop.

"What are you doing, Victoria?" Newman asked. "Mom needs the carrots and sesame seeds you picked up at the grocery store in order to finish dinner. I'll come and get them from you."

Newman crossed the yard to his sister, wondering why she didn't answer. His eyes finally settled on Roger. "What happened to him?"

"Really, Newman, are you as cold and insensitive as an ice cube?" Victoria snapped. "I called him sweet and he turned..." Victoria gasped as the groceries she was passing to Newman fell to the ground. Newman had turned into a statue of ice with two shocked eyeballs staring up at her.

In an instant, Victoria realized the ring she wore was cursed. She tore it off her thumb and threw it into the street. As soon as the ring was off her thumb, her brothers began to revive. She no longer wondered why someone left that ring on the sidewalk by the grocery store.

"What would you think about us living in Italy for a year while I do research for my book?" Zari's mom asked. The family was just finishing their dinner. Zari's brother was in the midst of taking a drink of water, which he ended up spitting across the table in his surprise. The topic must have been discussed with Zari's stepdad before, because he remained calm, intently watching the kids' reactions.

Besides being shocked, Zari didn't really know how she felt. Her first thought was that it would be exciting. Zari loved traveling and new experiences; however, then she realized that it would mean leaving her friends and missing out on her usual activities. "Would the adventure of living in a foreign country be worth that?" she wondered.

As it turned out, Zari's opinion didn't matter so much. Her mom and stepdad had already decided that it was too amazing an opportunity to pass up. Zari's mom had the chance to take a year off from teaching at the college to finish her book, which she had been working on for years. Since it dealt with Italy, her best work could be done there. So in what seemed like no time at all, their apartment had been sublet, most of their things put in storage, their vital possessions packed, and they were off to Italy.

Once there, Zari had the easiest time adjusting. Her older brother didn't even seem to try. He just kept complaining about all the things he missed about home. Real football, not soccer, was near the top of the list. Zari's mom and stepdad were hopeless when it came to learning Italian. "We're just too old," they bemoaned. Zari, on the other hand, was the right age. Before long, she was speaking almost like a native.

Although Zari made some friends at her new school, she spent most of her leisure time with older women in their neighborhood. They seemed to absolutely adore her and all children. They argued about who would get to teach Zari how to make homemade pasta. They all wanted to feed her delicious cream-filled pastries. They loved telling her about their families and their country. Zari learned more from them than she did in school.

"Trevor," his mother sternly said one morning over cereal, "you have to stop spending so much time just sitting around watching TV. You're turning into a couch potato."

Trevor's father agreed. "Too much television isn't good for anyone," he admonished. "It'll rot your brain." He abruptly stopped, with a horrified look on his face. After a pause, he continued. "I can't believe I just repeated something my parents used to say to me; however, in this case it's true! You need to get some fresh air and exercise every day."

"Whatever," Trevor muttered under his breath as he retrieved his skateboard from the closet and whizzed off to school. All of his friends watched just as much television as he did, and nothing was wrong with them. Plus, the air outside wasn't exactly fresh. They did live in a big city, after all.

Although he thought he had successfully dismissed his parents' comments as worthless, at school Trevor noticed for the first time things about his friends and many others students, which made him wonder if there was some truth to his parents' claim. His friends didn't seem to be in very good shape, and all they talked about was "screen stuff": favorite TV shows and movies, video games, and websites.

At noon, Trevor wasn't able to enjoy his lunch. He kept staring at his baked potato, thinking that it wasn't attractive at all. To think that he had anything in common with this pasty vegetable worried him.

After school, two of Trevor's friends stopped him near his locker.

"Do you want to come over to my house to play my new video game? I have all evening free," Layla asked.

"No, let's go to my place," Hank said. "Movie Madness is on tonight. My mom will make us pizza and popcorn, and we won't even have to get up off the couch. It'll be awesome!"

Trevor patted his stomach, which was admittedly looking a bit like a potato these days, and picked up his skateboard. He was going to need to spend a lot of time outdoors exercising to get back in shape. "No, guys," he told them, "how about joining me for a swim or jog instead?"

"You won't believe what I saw this morning!" Chen exclaimed at the breakfast table. "Just before the sun came up, a spaceship landed on the roof of the house next door. It stayed for about 15 minutes and then flew away. Do you think our new neighbors are aliens?"

"No, I'm sure it was just a dream, Chen," his mother said. But Chen wasn't so sure.

When he arrived at school, Chen learned that his class had a new teacher. The new teacher's name was Mrs. Ling. Chen thought she behaved very strangely.

"How are all my human boys and girls today?" Mrs. Ling questioned the class. "Today I will teach you all about my, I mean OUR, solar system. I will draw a sketch of the solar system on the chalkboard for everyone."

Mrs. Ling then picked up the chalk, but instead of raising it to write on the chalkboard located right behind her, she crossed the room and attempted to scribble on the window.

"Oh," she said when Kim Sung pointed out that the window was not the chalkboard. "Ah, yes, here is the chalkboard. Now I will draw our solar system."

Then Mrs. Ling began to draw many loops and circles on the blackboard. She drew a fiery sun and the planets Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. Everyone expected her to stop after drawing the tiny, cold planet at the edge of the solar system. Instead, she drew a gigantic planet surrounded by hoops of fire.

"What planet is that?" Kim Sung asked. "We don't have a planet like THAT in our solar system."

"Of course not," Mrs. Ling replied hastily as she erased the unusual planet. "I just drew it to see if you all were paying attention, and you were! You are a wonderful class of human boys and girls."

Later that night, while Chen was walking home from school, he saw Mrs. Ling walking down the sidewalk toward him. Chen was about to jump into the bushes and hide, but Mrs. Ling turned and walked up to the door of the house next to Chen's house. Oddly enough, it was the same house the spaceship had landed on the night before!

The black squirrel worked all summer long gathering acorns and lining her nest with tufts of grass. She groomed her bristly black tail and practiced jumping from branch to branch.

"Looking good," the gray squirrel would holler up at the black squirrel whenever he watched her practice. "You should join the circus or something. Then you wouldn't have to worry about stocking food for winter or gathering twigs for your nest."

"You should worry about your own food and nest," she told him as she paused to frown down at him from a swaying branch. "You run around on the ground all day and steal your food from the human's bird feeder. A squirrel can't rely on humans to provide food all winter. Just you watch. In the middle of January, the humans will forget to fill the feeder. Then all you lazy animals that depend on the feeder during the summer are going to be in trouble."

The gray squirrel cracked another sunflower seed between his sharp teeth.

"That'll never happen," he said. "Those humans fill the bird feeder every week."

"Mark my words, Mr. Gray Squirrel," she said. "You will wish you had prepared for winter like me."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said the gray squirrel, rolling his eyes behind the black squirrel's back. "Oh look, they're putting out more seeds and orange halves. See you around."

Just as the black squirrel predicted, the bird feeder was full all through December, but when January rolled around, the blue jays finished all the seed and the feeder stayed empty for a week. The black squirrel was well fed and warm with her hoard of acorns and cozy nest, but the gray squirrel was hungry and cold. In a week's time, the gray squirrel lost all of his winter fat. He was especially skinny and gruff the evening he knocked on the black squirrel's door.

"Please let me in," he squeaked. "I have no nest and no food. I should have prepared for winter in the fall just like you said."

"You're quite right," the black squirrel said. "If you're going to stay with me, you can shell the nuts."

Mrs. Huffman, a woman who lived at the end of Mona's street, had dragon-like features. She had green, glowing eyes and dry, scaly hands. Her house had four chimneys that were constantly smoking, even in the middle of July. Her windows were smudged black with soot and smoke.

The other kids on the block told Mona that Mrs. Huffman and all of Mrs. Huffman's relatives were dragons. Mona didn't know if she believed the rumors about Mrs. Huffman. Last week she'd observed the old woman stacking firewood next to her stone house. She'd looked tired and worn out to Mona. "Aren't dragons supposed to be invincible?" wondered Mona. "If Mrs. Huffman was a dragon, why did she seem to have such a hard time stacking firewood?"

"She needs all that wood," whispered Ned Swampett, Mona's next-door neighbor. "Dragon babies won't hatch unless their eggs are constantly kept exposed to open flames."

Mona thought about Ned's explanation the next day as she watched Mrs. Huffman chopping more wood. Could it be true that the old woman was concealing dragon eggs in her basement?

"She's got a dungeon full of rubies," whispered Shelia Swampett, Ned's sister, while they watched Mrs. Huffman climb in her rusted sedan and drive away. "She's going to the jewelers now to purchase more rubies. Did you know that baby dragons eat rubies, Mona?" asked Shelia.

When Mrs. Huffman returned, she had a jeweler's box tucked under her arm. When she accidentally stumbled and dropped it on her way up her front walk, Mona saw the glimmer of rubies in the afternoon sunshine.

Mona decided she would satisfy her curiosity. She waited for Mrs. Huffman to leave again, and then she snuck over to the house and slipped through a smudged basement window.

There she found a room with four fireplaces. In the middle of the room was a golden nest. In the nest was a pile of baby dragons sleeping in a lethargic heap. The dragons were black and smoke curled from their nostrils. Placed next to them was a bowl filled with rubies—their favorite meal.

Jean led her sister Annabelle and her brother Kevin into the foothills of the mountains. There were rumors of extraordinary things happening near the creek by the mountains. All of the children in the hollow heard stories about a character named Johnny Rabbit. The children said he would sit on the porch of his rundown old cabin and scare off visitors. They said if you stopped to visit Johnny Rabbit, he would try to frighten you away. Many of the neighborhood children spoke of monsters in the pond near his house. Johnny Rabbit kept the monsters to make people stay away. There were also tales about his mean dogs, the dangerous poison ivy that he planted around his house, and the trained bees that would sting anybody who tried to trespass on his property.

Jean did not believe these stories and intended to find out the truth of the matter. Jean led her little sister and brother further into the woods. They walked for half an hour, and finally came to an old shack in a clearing. A sign on the fence read, "No Trespassing." Jean looked past the fence and saw an old man sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch. At first, Jean was a little frightened. Then she said, "Hello there."

"Hello," the man responded. "What do you want?"

"I just wanted to meet you," said Jean holding her brother's and sister's hands.

"Just a second," said the man. He told his old bloodhound to go inside the house. Jean walked to his porch and sat down with Kevin and Annabelle. The man had two big front teeth and twitched his mouth like a rabbit. Jean found out his name was Johnny and he had lived in this house his whole life. He raised carp in the pond on his farm, often had rabbits for supper, and liked to eat honey. Jean learned that he was a nice man and that all the rumors about him were false. After a nice talk, Jean, Kevin, and Annabelle walked away, noticing the large beehive near Johnny's front gate.

"He was a very nice man after all," said Jean to her sister and brother. "I guess we tend to fear those things we don't understand."

Josh left his tent early in the morning, hoping to see lots of deer and other wildlife up close. The conditions were perfect: cool air, little wind, and a mostly sunny sky. Josh made a special effort to avoid making noise as he walked in the woods, not wanting to snap any twigs to alert wildlife of a foreign presence in their midst. Josh took a deep breath of the late fall air and knew that today was his kind of day.

He turned east off the old logging road leading from the campgrounds and headed towards Big Bay Ridge. He noticed quite a few deer tracks in the soft forest floor and discovered a sapling near the trail that obviously had been rubbed by a large buck.

Upon reaching the ridge, he settled down into a spot that seemed almost guaranteed to reward him with lots of wildlife sightings. The white-tailed deer were apt to move this morning, and the promise of deer activity excited Josh. He fingered his camera in anticipation, making sure all the settings were right for the conditions.

Josh waited in complete silence, looking and listening for any sign that an animal was nearby. He knew that to be a successful wildlife photographer, he needed to be more patient. The trick, he figured, was to occupy his mind with interesting thoughts while remaining alert to everything in his surroundings.

Suddenly Josh heard a sound that was different. He immediately shifted into a better position for shooting and readied his camera. He crouched, tense, his heart pounding so hard that he was sure every creature in the forest could hear it. Then, from the bottom of the ridge, the distinctive form of a deer appeared. It was a doe, and Josh admired her beauty and grace as she browsed along the bottom of the ridge. Even with his special lens, the doe was too far away for a good shot, yet Josh still took a few photos just in case that was the closest she'd come. Eventually, the doe ventured right near Josh's hiding place, and he clicked the shutter again and again. Even if one of those shots didn't produce an award-winning photo, it was a memorable experience.



Bridget Baxter lived in a black and white world. Her stockings were black and white striped, her school uniform was black and white checkered, and her father's automobile was black. Her hair was an odd shade of gray and so were her eyes, ears, and feet.

It seemed that Bridget was the only one in her world who noticed the problem. Everything seemed boring and mundane in shades of black and white. Bridget dreamed of something more. She fantasized of a world in color, even though she couldn't explain to anyone exactly what color was all about.

"It's just different," she told her grandmother one morning over a cup of foggy tea with a lump of colorless sugar and a slice of uninspiring lemon.

"It's uplifting and wonderful. If only I could show you the ideas I have in my head."

"I thought the same thing when I was your age too, Bridget," her grandmother told her. "It's best to focus on your homework, dear, and get your head out of the clouds."

That night, Bridget attempted to focus on the black and white pages of her books, but she failed. Instead, she slipped outside where the sky was the cheerless color of ashes and walked across the empty pastures and paddocks. Bridget disregarded her surroundings until she was completely lost. Then she noticed a black-caped woman waiting in the middle of her path.

"Are you the one that's looking for something more?" the woman asked.

Bridget was about to deny the truth when she saw something around the woman's neck that caught her attention. It was a color that Bridget had never seen before.

"Do you like it?" the woman asked. She pulled back her hair and showed Bridget her necklace. Then she stopped abruptly and held an intricate box out to Bridget. "Take it," she said. The box was filled with colorful beads of all different shades and hues.

"Go on with you now," the woman shouted, "and share your gift."

Bridget swung around and then turned back. "Thank you," she shouted, but the woman had already vanished and the pasture was black once again. Bridget clutched her box with excitement and ran all the way home to show her grandmother.

The Minnesota ice fishing season began on a damp day with a bone-chilling wind. But a little inclement weather was not enough to spoil my seventy-eight-year-old Grandpa's plans! He got up earlier than usual and had a big breakfast of bacon, scrambled eggs, toast, and orange juice. Having organized his fishing gear the night before, he only had to grab a thermos of hot coffee before heading out on the ice in hopes of landing a big walleye.

Grandpa had a lot of patience and sat on his bucket patiently for an hour without a single bite. Jeff went down to check on Grandpa and see if he needed anything. It was so cold that Jeff could barely stand there for a few minutes of chatting before returning to the house with an update on Grandpa's progress. Dad felt bad that the fish weren't biting. As he looked out the window, he said with a gasp, "Oh no!"

Quickly, he opened the window and yelled out a warning. "Dad!" he shouted. "Be careful. The ice might crack beneath you."

But Grandpa had hearing problems, and in turning his head toward the window, the bucket slid towards the hole in the ice. Dad waited until Mom came into the room. She did not think Grandpa's situation was very safe. She went over to the window and yelled, "Grandpa! Get off the bucket."

Again, Grandpa did not hear her. Everyone agreed that Grandpa could fall in the water without getting hurt, but he would definitely be cold and wet, which would make him crabby. Mom and Dad started to argue over who should go outside and tell Grandpa to come in soon.

"Oh, for goodness sake," said Grandma, putting down her crossword puzzle and getting up from the sofa. She flung open the window and yelled, "Bob, LUNCH!"

And with that, Grandpa safely stood straight up, put down his pole, and walked up the hill. Shortly after Grandpa was in the house, he looked at the empty table and asked, "Where's lunch?" Mom and Dad looked at each other with disbelief.