

In the field of geology, there isn't a scientist with more skill, determination or motivation than Dr. Isabel Rodriguez.

Dr. Rodriguez started her collection of rocks at an early age. When she was a child, she would take rocks home to her family's cattle ranch at the edge of the desert. As a grown woman, she turned her childhood interest into a career and now teaches geology to college students from the United States and other countries. As a college instructor, she trains young men and women to be skilled geologists. She shows them how to read maps of major landforms and how to tell the difference between a diamond and a lump of glass. She provides her students knowledge they can use while looking for rocks and fossils in the field. For example, her students learn that the Red Mountains in Colorado are tinted red because of iron compounds and that the best source for gems are rivers flowing from volcanoes.

One afternoon, as part of her lecture, Dr. Rodriguez held up her pencil. "The graphite in the lead of this pencil is chemically identical to diamonds," she said. "But because they have different crystal structures, they have very different physical properties. You can write with graphite in the pencil, but it is basically worthless. On the other hand, the diamond comes in a variety of colors and is priceless."

In the field, Dr. Rodriguez is a rock-finding whiz, amazing her students during their outings across the sun-baked desert. Although many fossils and semi-precious stones lie in plain view, they are clear only to her keen eyes.

"An opal has a blue-green glow," she tells her students as they walk across the desert. "When you find one, notice how it reflects sunlight."

Dr. Rodriguez is constantly digging up new treasures. Finding a million-year-old carbon imprint of a fern frond trapped in a sandstone wall is not unusual for Dr. Rodriguez. On outings with her students, she is frequently heard saying, "This stone is amazing. Students, come and look at this find!"

Jellyfish are creatures found in most bodies of salt water, from the tropical waters of the Caribbean Sea, to the cold, dark waters of the Arctic Ocean.

Jellyfish are unusual creatures. When seen in the water, it's hard to believe they are a species from this planet. They look like aliens hanging suspended in water with their luminous layers of tissue and flesh. They have long, curly tentacles and plastic-like bubble tops that sway in the sea.

Although it's difficult to believe, jellyfish have no heart, blood, brain, or gills. You can see through their mostly hollow stomach cavities where their food is digested and dissolved. Jellyfish have no proper eyes or ears. In fact, it's possible to believe that jellyfish are just brainless blobs without the slightest spark of intelligence. Amazingly enough, despite their lack of sight and hearing, jellyfish can distinguish touch, temperature, light, and darkness. They also know the direction and pull of water currents.

Jellyfish come in an assortment of colors and shades. The jellyfish living in cooler waters are generally pale or milky white in color. Many of the jellyfish that live in warmer, tropical waters are often strikingly colored in shades of magenta, scarlet, yellow, and orange.

A jellyfish can be as tiny as a thimble, and some can grow to be as colossal as a satellite dish. Most jellyfish can maneuver feebly in the water; however, their poor swimming skills place them at the mercy and whimsy of ocean currents.

Some jellyfish ride the ocean currents alone, while other species travel in special groups called colonies. The man-of-war is an example of a highly adapted jellyfish that travels with a colony. The man-of-war serves a special function in its colony. It catches prey with a very long tentacle that can trail as far as one hundred feet through the sea. The man-of-war's prey includes shrimp, squid, and fish. It also produces potent venom that is harmful to humans who may swim nearby, unaware of the man-of-war's clever and stunning snares.

Mr. Harper was seventy-nine years old. However, that didn't prevent him from rising every morning at sunrise and walking the property lines of his farm. Mr. Harper knew his farm's boundaries and what property belonged to him and what didn't. Most mornings he found evidence of trespassers on his land the night before, but he didn't mind.

The trespassers left sharp footprints in the turf when they came for the windfalls of apples and plums that littered the orderly rows of his orchard. They came for the bud-blooms on his evergreens and the sweet acorns that fell from his oaks. Sometimes Mr. Harper was lucky enough to come upon the culprits. White-tailed deer were to blame for nibbling the apples on his apple trees. Sometimes he was fortunate enough to catch them dancing on their hind legs as they stretched to reach fruit that had not yet fallen.

Mr. Harper was the proprietor of a tree farm that he'd inherited from his grandparents many decades ago. The trees that now dwarfed him were planted when he was only a toddler. He was an adolescent when the orchards had yielded their first crop of fruit.

Even though he was now an old man and had been a widower for ten years, he was not a lonely man. How could an old man feel lonesome when a family of squirrels transformed the grand oak trees in his front yard into an apartment complex? How could he feel lonesome when there was so much work to be done?

Mr. Harper treated his wild guests like royalty because he wanted them to return season after season and keep him company. To keep the animals happy, he put out seed for the birds that nested in his trees and salt-block appetizers for the deer herd that roamed his land. He wooed his raccoon friends with peanut butter sandwiches nailed to fence posts. In return, they provided him with entertainment all winter long. Mr. Harper enjoyed everything about his tree farm, but his favorite part was watching the scenes of nature unfold before him.

Martha sat down at a table in the New York Public Library and began reading the morning's newspaper. The headlines of the New York Times immediately grabbed her attention. NASA announced that another planet had been discovered in our solar system and that the planet supported intelligent life.

This amazing announcement left Martha light-headed and dizzy. She had heard rumors of a new planet, but the announcement of extraterrestrials was still a shock. A planet that could support intelligent life was far different from frozen bacteria growing on rocks on Mars. NASA was describing creatures of an alien nature that could possibly communicate with humans. The idea made Martha laugh out loud.

She opened the newspaper again and started to reread the article she had just finished. No, she hadn't missed any major points anywhere. The planet had not yet been named, but NASA was already preparing to send a research team. Martha's dream was coming true.

Martha had been a scientist and an astronaut for well over a decade. She'd completed five missions, docked with a space station in orbit, and even floated around in outer space while staring down at the hazy, blue-green planet Earth.

After a telephone call to NASA, she learned that next week she was going into isolation with the rest of the men and women who were charted to go on the space mission. At the end of the month she was going to be one of the lucky scientists rocketed into space to collect data samples and catalogue information. The excitement of her upcoming training and the new mission made her anxious to leave. She was about to meet with genuine extraterrestrials!

When she got home, her dogs, a German shepherd named Sam and a poodle named Walter, were cavorting around on the lawn. When Martha climbed out of the car, they bounded across the yard and slobbered all over her.

"Come on you guys, get off me!" Her command didn't deter the dogs. They were almost acting as if they knew she was going to blast off to a different world and not return for six months.

As Walter panted and looked up at her with euphoria, Martha speculated about how the aliens would greet her. Of course, it didn't matter how they greeted her, she knew she would treasure the moment forever.

Albert the albatross loved soaring through the air. He adored swooping high on warm, thermal vents and swooping low on cold, polar winds. He also managed to deliver mail while performing all of those great feats.

Albert was responsible for delivering all of his mail on time and always felt obligated to do so. He would fly in fair or foul weather and through clear or cloudy skies. He flew the Arctic run during December and proved himself to be a very daring and courageous flyer.

At the Mount Everest Central Post Office where Albert worked, there were rumors about a new postage stamp with a picture of Albert's handsome profile on it. Albert was always very humble when people congratulated him on this honor.

"Thank you for your kind sentiments," he would say. "However, I think Eddie the eagle should have the honors. He flies the hurricane run from Houston to Tallahassee and braves the Gulf of Mexico."

As Albert was packing his backpack full of letters addressed to Nome, Alaska, and Alberta, Canada, Francine the flamingo cornered him on the loading docks.

"You're so brave, Al," Francine said as she clacked her long, black beak at Albert. "You take such risks and put yourself in such great danger. I just saw the stamp and it's gorgeous."

"Thank you, Franny," Albert replied, as he crammed more first-class mail into his backpack. "I think they should have chosen Gretta the great horned owl. She's winged through tougher scrapes than I have. She flies the twister run down the length of tornado alley, all the way through Indiana, Kansas, and Illinois." Albert shook his head. "She's one brave gal."

Albert made sure his pack was secure. He checked and double-checked his landing gear. He also made sure to check his two-way radio with the control tower located on a distant peak in the Himalayas.

Then, with one flap of his great albatross wings, he was in the air and flying over the ice and the snow. He was flying through the middle of the worst blizzard to trample the Midwest in years. Albert was in his element.

Lewis Holton was the only meteorologist at Channel Seven News. As a result, whenever his predictions for weekend weather or daytime highs were incorrect, he was forced to listen to complaints from everyone.

One week, Lewis predicted a beautiful, mild weekend with highs in the low seventies and clear, starry nights. The weekend weather turned out to be just the opposite—it was nasty.

Maxine Smith, the Weather Department's secretary, was fed up with the people calling to complain about Lewis's worthless weekend forecast. She started transferring the angry calls directly to Lewis's office.

Lewis attempted to ignore the telephone. At the same time, he tried to find the errors in his weekend forecast. The only thing Lewis could determine was that he'd been terribly wrong in his predictions. Apparently, a cold front had blown in Friday evening, wedging itself under the warm air that had been hanging over the city. It built up a row of thunderheads that resulted in a prolonged bout of rain and thunder.

"It rained all weekend!" an angry man shouted at Lewis over the telephone when he finally dared to answer it. "I watched your show Friday evening and you assured us we'd have a glorious weekend."

"But I—," Lewis attempted to explain his reasoning. He tried to tell the man that the weather is determined by many factors. Atmospheric pressure, humidity, temperature, and winds are all involved in forecasting the weather. The tiniest variation in any one of those things can have an effect on resulting weather patterns.

"Pardon me, if I could—," Lewis tried again. The irate man angrily hung up on him.

"You could have figured out the dark skies yourself," Lewis said, despite the fact that no one was listening, "if only you'd looked skyward."

That evening, Lewis cited the fact that cirrus clouds were progressing across the skyline. "Cirrus clouds are a sign of changeable weather to come," he squeaked. While he spoke, he gestured to his weather map where he'd plotted out high and low pressure systems in swipes of red and blue.

"That means watch out, because anything is possible."

Up, over my head, I spy about a million ruby red oak leaves and I stop to stare in quiet amazement.

"Wow!" I say, as I grab hold of my grandpa's hand and tug him toward the gigantic oak that supports the brilliant leaves. The tree trunk is cragged and scarred from the two hundred years it has spent surviving the elements.

"Look, Grandpa," I say, as I hold up a crimson leaf that has fallen to the ground from one of the branches towering above us. "Isn't this one of the most gorgeous things you've ever seen?"

Grandpa takes the leaf and admires it for a moment before he stows it in the brown paper sack that he has been carrying for me.

"It's a keeper," he says. "Where should we look next?"

"How about over in the old maple grove?" I ask. We then trudge on, crunching over drying and decomposing leaves as we continue.

It's autumn, my favorite season, and today my Grandpa Kendall and I are collecting only the most vibrant leaves from the trees of his forest. Every October my mom, dad, and I drive from the city to my Grandpa Kendall's dairy farm to enjoy the show the trees put on.

My Grandpa Kendall's pastures have especially beautiful hardwood trees. He also has black and white dairy cows with clanging metal bells around their necks who follow us wherever we go. They must think we have corn in our pockets because they tiptoe behind us, sniffing at our pockets at every given opportunity.

Sometimes those huge creatures startle me when they rudely moo in my face and sniff at my hair. They have sticky, pink noses and breath that smells like hay and grain.

I hold up a maple leaf for one of them to inspect, wondering if it will just gobble it out of my hand, but instead, the cow turns away with a toss of her big head.

When we return to the house, Grandpa and I will relax for a while in front of the fire as Grandma Kendall irons the leaves we've collected between pieces of wax paper.

Sitting upon a gigantic lily pad located smack dab in the middle of a sparkling pond was a rather large, green, spotted frog. On one particularly steamy summer afternoon, a princess set sail across the pond. As she glided gently past the lily pad, the spotted frog raised his rather ugly head and beckoned to her in a very loud voice.

"Kiss me," demanded the frog. "You must kiss me upon my balding forehead. Kiss me now, and I will offer you the luxury of marrying a handsome prince."

"Not on your life," replied the princess as she wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I am the ruler of my kingdom and I pass my own laws. I can also lead my own magnificent armies into battle. I certainly have no need for a prince, whether he is truly handsome or otherwise."

"If you will simply and eloquently place a kiss upon my forehead, I will grant you tremendous fortunes. Kiss me and I will make you the heir of millions and you will never desire anything more."

"I think not," snorted the princess. "I maintain a balanced budget and my kingdom is showing excellent economic growth. I believe your fortunes will devalue my currency, send inflation soaring, and cripple our economy."

"Kiss me upon my forehead," said the grumpy old frog. "Kiss me and I will grant you dazzling beauty. Please do as I have requested and this will truly be your legacy."

"How very, very flattering," sneered the princess. "As you can see, I may be quite plain, but as you may already know, beauty does not last and personality is what really matters."

"Fine, whatever is it that you request?" demanded the frog growing ever more impatient. He was, by the way, used to dealing more with the old-fashioned kind of princesses. The princess thought extremely hard and leaned very close to the old frog.

"I want to be happy," she whispered and kissed the old frog upon his forehead.

"You have refused wealth, beauty, and love, but yet you want happiness from kissing a frog! That my dear, is something that I cannot grant you." The old frog laughed loudly and leapt from the gigantic lily pad into the clear, blue pond.



The naive third graders thought it was a coincidence when they read the last story in their hard-covered literature book on the last day of the quarter, March thirty-first. When their teacher, Mrs. Larson, said the next day included a reward party, the children cheered with excitement.

Immediately they began organizing a plan and volunteers raised their hands to bring soda, popcorn, and other goodies. The students voted on a movie, choosing a very charming tale about a shaggy and heroic dog. Because the movie was not given any rating, Mrs. Larson said she would need to preview the movie before showing it to the class. If it was suitable for general audiences, it would be shown. If it wasn't suitable, they would watch their alternate choice.

The next day, the students giggled as they came into the classroom and started to divide up the treats. When their plates were full and their laughter died down, Mrs. Larson began to set up the show.

"Boys and girls," she began. Immediately, all eyes were focused on the teacher as she began to introduce the movie starring a dog who wore silver sunglasses and a blue bandana. "Last night I watched this movie at home and you certainly made an excellent choice. In this movie, there is an incredible puppy. He is so hilarious that my husband even laughed out loud! Today promises to be a party I know you'll remember!"

The lights were turned off and the closed blinds cut off the warm sunlight. Mrs. Larson started the movie and began to adjust the volume. Instead of the movie, people playing golf appeared on the screen. At first it just seemed like a lengthy commercial, but the reality was that it was a golf tournament.

Puzzled, the children sat speechless with handfuls of popcorn held in midair as they focused on the screen. One by one, they began to whisper their displeasure until they concluded something had accidentally been mishandled at the teacher's house. At the peak of complaints and disappointment, Mrs. Larson switched on the lights, pointed at the classroom filled with students, and shouted, "April Fools everybody! I got you! I got you! Now, is everyone ready for the real movie?"

Stacy, Mary, and Diana had carried the final load of camping equipment they needed for their wilderness adventure. The load included such necessities as an old, beat-up cooler filled with sandwiches, sodas, a battery-operated lantern, flashlights, and a birthday cake for Stacy. They had hiked across three grassy acres to Stacy's cabin next to a grove of maples by the lakeshore.

The evening was delightful as the girls played games, gossiped, and devoured their supper of sandwiches and potato chips. After dinner, Diana brought out the delicious chocolate cake her mother had baked for Stacy's birthday. They each cut themselves a giant piece and relaxed, letting the cake dissolve in their mouths.

As the sun set, the clouds of mosquitoes came out, biting viciously. The girls covered the remaining cake and gathered their garbage in a plastic container. Then they settled into the cabin and began to tell spooky stories. Diana acted out a story about a house that supposedly was haunted. Stacy told a story called "The Hook." After the stories, sleep was a hopeless endeavor.

Suddenly Mary heard a crunching sound coming from the direction of the maple grove. With tremendous squealing and the frantic grabbing of flashlights, the girls covered in their sleeping bags. They attempted to convince each other that it was nothing but the wind, but the crunching noises continued coming closer and closer. Now, there was no mistaking the sound for what it actually was—footsteps!

After a muffled discussion through their layers of sleeping bags, Stacy was nominated to shine her flashlight out the cabin's front door in the direction of the mysterious crunching. Diana would be ready to swing the camping lantern as a weapon and Mary would scream as loudly as she could as a distraction. On the count of three the action began and continued until Mary stopped screaming to catch her breath. As soon as she did, Mary could hear Stacy and Diana laughing hysterically. They were pointing out the door to the chubbiest raccoon the girls had ever seen. He had carefully removed the cover from the chocolate cake. Oblivious to the racket going on inside the cabin, the girls found him calmly chowing down on the rest of Stacy's birthday cake.

From the birch-bark canoe, Joseph Anthony scanned the banks of the Serpentine River. His voyageurs paddled hard and fast through the water, so he had to make his observations quickly. Finding a location for his wintering post was an important decision, one that could mean success or failure for his fur-trading mission.

Prior to his mission, Anthony met and stayed with the Chippewa leaders for two days. They knew the region well and assured him it was excellent.

"The land is rich with game and food," they had said. "The furs are also very plentiful."

Judging by the looks of the area, Anthony believed he had been told the truth. He spied a steep bank through the towering white pines. He commanded his voyageurs, "Put the canoe in there, by that big rock."

Anthony scrambled out of the canoe and climbed a tall, rocky ridge. He eagerly surveyed the land and river from the vantage point. Once the trees were cleared, the men would have a good view of the river and an excellent location for fishing. The American Indian camp behind them could provide food and other items for trade. Satisfied with the location, Anthony ordered his men to start building their post.

Soon the October air rang with the thud of axes hitting tree trunks. The voyageurs toppled pine tree after pine tree, carefully clearing the overlook. Using the wood they had cleared from the overlook, they erected a log structure with six connecting rooms for sleeping quarters, storage, and trading. When the rooms were completed, the voyageurs built a stockade of upright logs surrounding a row house. Lastly, they built huge gates that could be closed against winter winds, invading enemies, or prowling animals.

In mid-November, Anthony climbed to the observation platform to inspect the completed work. While he watched, smoke curled from the chimneys of the sturdy post as voyageurs bustled about with armloads of firewood. Local people entered the stockade carrying food or furs and left carrying traded goods. Anthony was very pleased as he watched the flag of the Great Northern Fur Company flying from its newly erected flagstaff. In Anthony's opinion, the flag represented the company, his men, and all of their tiring efforts.

Monarch butterflies are one of the most stunning and amazing butterfly species on the planet. These orange and black spotted beauties spend their summers as far north as Canada and migrate to the mountains of Mexico for the winter.

It's because they can't survive below-freezing temperatures that Monarch butterflies must migrate. They can survive some snowfall, however, only as long as the temperatures are mild and the snow melts quickly.

One of the amazing facts about Monarch butterflies is that they migrate two thousand miles every fall. Two thousand miles is quite a distance for a little winged insect that weighs less than a gram. Incredibly, the butterflies manage to flutter to Mexico in about two week's time. They average about fifty miles per day on their strenuous journey.

When the Monarchs arrive in Mexico, they join hundreds and thousands of other butterflies in special butterfly sanctuaries located within the hills. The butterflies then cling to a particular type of fir tree that grows in the area.

It really is an astonishing sight to hike up to the butterfly sanctuaries. The butterflies can be seen clinging to the fir trees like a bunch of ripe, orange fruit. At first it is confusing. One expects to see butterflies, not fruit. However, after taking a closer look, one can see the "fruit" quivering slightly. The slightest sound, like a branch snapping on the ground, can startle the butterflies and send them airborne in a flurry of vibrant orange wings.

Despite their delicate look, Monarch butterflies are actually very hardy and have awed and stumped scientists for decades. These scientists have the delicate job of tagging Monarch butterflies to track the amber-winged insects on their long journey over the North American continent. Tracking the butterflies has only served to amaze the scientists even more.

Monarch butterflies have always been viewed as delicate and fragile, but the butterflies truly are little miracles with wings. It seems that Mother Nature has designed them specifically to endure both the extremes of temperatures and the great distances the planet Earth has forced them to fly over.

Professor Lee Chin was the oldest instructor at the Baxter Academy of Science and Biology. Not only was he the wisest professor at the Academy, but he was also one of the most admired professors by the students.

Professor Chin ruled over the Biology Department. His special interest was the study of insects. Students of biology were always seeking his attention and approval.

The walls of Professor Chin's third floor classroom were filled with many tall shelves. The shelves were crammed with dusty, leather-bound books about ancient insects. There were also jars filled with preserved creatures and glass cases protecting a collection of dried beetles and butterflies.

One would have thought that students would avoid Professor Chin's classroom with all of its smelly and shriveled animal specimens. Instead, students flocked there. They gathered in the halls before the morning bell and filled the seats of the desks to capacity during lecture hours.

No student could really describe why they were so drawn to Professor Chin. There were plenty of other boring, musty professors at Baxter Academy. It most certainly wasn't because of his bald head, his stooped back, or his brown pantsuits.

His English was halting at best and he sometimes got off topic. He'd mention dragonflies or some beetle of Africa and then speak about it for most of the remaining class period. The confusing habit he had of veering off topic should have annoyed his pupils. Instead, it intrigued all of them. It was well known that after one of Professor Chin's rambling lectures, all of the books in the library about dragonflies or the beetles of Africa would be checked out by lunch.

One of the most charming things about Professor Chin was that he kept the doors to his office open at all hours. Students working in the field or on their senior projects especially liked the fact that he was readily available. They found it to be a great relief when they could knock on his door and tell him about a swarm of Luna moths congregating around the street lamps of the campus, or how a strange type of beetle had infested the grass of the soccer field. No matter what insect or infestation, Professor Chin was always wide-eyed and interested in anything the students had to say.

He was always ready for an entomological adventure, and that made Professor Chin the best professor at Baxter Academy.

With a skull and crossbones flag flying high through the air, a group of daring pirates navigated their ship through the stormy sea towards a distant island. Through the mist before them lay the land they had dreamt of, Treasure Island. Treasure Island was rumored to have dozens of pirate treasure chests buried beneath its sandy beaches for all to find or to die trying. The captain of this ship was determined to find treasure, even if it meant death.

As the pirate ship entered a hidden bay, the heavy sea subsided. The ship's captain, Brutus Johnson, ordered the anchor to be dropped and the pirates to paddle the long boats to the island shore. The boats were lowered and the pirates descended on cargo nets. There was "Scurvy" Pete and "Peg-leg" Thomas in the first boat with "Big John" Thumb and Mr. Chimney following behind them in the second boat. "Tiny" Kim, the scallywag, jumped aboard another skiff with the captain and "Cabin Boy" Bob as the group of pirates set off in search of the island's treasure.

The three boats were quickly rowed to shore. After they pulled their boats up on the sandy beach, Captain Johnson located his treasure map and studied the map and the island's landscape. "It says here that we must take thirty paces to the north from Friar Rock."

The pirates walked for hours and finally found a large rock that resembled a man wearing a robe. From the north side of the giant rock, they paced off thirty steps and reached a crooked, dead tree. Cabin Boy Bob looked at the map. "This must be Deadman's Tree. The map says to climb the tree and look to the west."

"Climb the tree and tell us what you see, Tiny Kim," said Scurvy Pete.

"I don't see anything but a cone-shaped mountain," Tiny Kim reported from the tree's highest branch.

"The volcano, we found it! That's what we've been searching for," the captain responded excitedly.

Once inside the extinct volcano, the pirates followed the map and led themselves through a dark tunnel to a large cave. Lining the sides of the cave, the pirates found several old trunks with heavy locks keeping them closed. With the report from a pistol echoing, a lock was shot off one of the trunks, and the lid was lifted. Inside the trunk, the pirates found thousands of shiny, gold medallions.

"Yes," said Captain Johnson, "the life of a pirate has paid off for me!"

Mad scientists aren't as creepy as I always assumed they were. Before I moved into Black Manor in Windham, Massachusetts, I would have told you that mad scientists were the strangest kind of people. I thought they were moody and dreary and always trying to get you to drink one of their eerie green potions that could turn you into a monster. Of course, that was before I met Dr. Sheldon Gomez, or Sigmund, as all of his doctor friends call him.

I didn't realize Sigmund, or Dr. Gomez, was a mad scientist until we were first introduced. In all honesty, I thought Sigmund was a gravedigger. I quickly came to that conclusion when I found him digging up earthworms and snails in my dead garden. My imagination was running wild as I watched Sigmund dig up shovels full of wet dirt. It was in that moment that I quickly ran back into my house and called the police.

Sigmund is a little over three feet tall. In reality, that hardly likens him to the cartoon gravediggers of my youth who were tall and skinny with shifty black eyes. Before we first met, I thought from the way he was dressed that he could also be a hardened criminal of some sort. I couldn't help but notice his grubby trousers, flannel shirt with lots of holes, and thick glasses held together with pieces of electrical tape.

After meeting Sigmund, it didn't take long for me to realize that he wasn't a villain at all. The more I got to know him, the more he appeared to be an upright, decent person with high moral values. It wasn't long into our friendship that he invited me over to his place for a tour of his laboratories.

His residence, a slightly tilted Tudor mansion, was only a half a mile down the road from mine. Perched on a hill of winter-bare maple and oak trees, his dwelling resembled a haunted house so much that I actually thought it was haunted. It had peaked towers and colonies of bats tucked under its eaves.

Sigmund showed me all of his pet projects. They included earthworms he was trying to make fluorescent, potted violets he claimed were "intelligent," snails he'd found in my garden, and bats that, under his care, were now as big as umbrellas.

Mad scientists aren't that bad at all. I can honestly say that one of them is now my best friend.

Miguel is an award-winning chef at the Santa Rosa Hotel in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. Miguel's grandmother had taught him when he was a little boy that cooking was a form of magic. She had much faith in his abilities and knew he could excel as a great chef as he got older. Miguel's grandmother also believed that when done correctly, good cooking could fill the stomach and soothe the soul.

From his years of experience in restaurants and cafes all over New Mexico, Miguel had confirmed that his grandmother was right. Miguel had witnessed bickering families shout across the table before being served. Then, as if it were a miracle, their anger would disappear as they ate his dishes. By the end of the meal, family members who had been arguing before the meal were kind and compassionate to one another.

It had been Miguel's grandmother who instructed him in the art of preparing mouthwatering dishes. Whenever Miguel prepared certain dishes, he thought back to his grandmother's kitchen with its views of the mesas and the desert. His memories of his grandmother were the most vivid when he cooked red bean burritos with fiery chili peppers and guacamole sauce. He could recall the dried herbs that had hung from the adobe and cedar ceiling of her kitchen. He remembered how the jars of spices with their cracked yellow labels and unusual names peeked out of every dark corner.

One of the first things Miguel's grandmother had taught him was that the herbs she used in her baking and cooking—the paprika, oregano, and dried chili peppers—didn't keep in direct sunlight. He spent many hours assisting her in constructing a special rack for her herbs and spices. Making herb racks was the first thing he did when he became the head chef at the Santa Rosa Hotel.

Miguel's assistant chefs had been flabbergasted by the collection of herbs and spices he had gathered over the years. Especially rare were the spices that he had to travel into the desert or overseas to collect. Miguel knew the spices helped make his meals good, but it was his grandmother's inspiration that made them fantastic.



The one chore Gilda detested more than any other chore was washing the dishes after supper. She hated standing in front of the kitchen sink, with its leaky faucet and the cold, drafty air around her ankles. She hated mucking out jelly jars and frying pans and scraping greasy casserole dishes and mixing spoons.

It seemed that whenever Gilda did the dishes, there was never enough dishwashing soap or hot water to get all of the dishes clean. In Gilda's mind, it always seemed like she was the only one who ended up scrubbing the dishes and practically catching pneumonia from the cold draft.

One afternoon, Gilda ran out of dishwashing soap. She grumbled and bent down to grab another bottle from beneath the sink. But instead of dishwashing soap and other cleaning supplies, she discovered a long, dark tunnel with a waxy trail of soap disappearing into it. Gilda got down on her hands and knees and crawled into the cupboard below the sink. As she stuck her head into the tunnel, she suddenly lost her balance.

"Eeeeeee!" she cried as she tumbled through tree roots, earthworms, and damp dirt.

Finally, Gilda stopped tumbling and found herself in a musty cave lined with bizarre lanterns that gave off green light. She noticed that the trail of soap she found wound its way between the stalagmites and stalactites of the cave and into the shadows beyond her.

Gilda pulled the nearest lantern from its ledge and hurried off in hot pursuit of an exit. She followed a path that got narrower and narrower for what seemed like miles and miles. Finally, she heard deep, grumbling voices and the splash of water. There was a horrible smell too, a combination of rancid fish and rotten eggs.

The stink made Gilda's eyes water and her stomach roll. Bracing her hands on a boulder, Gilda peeked around the large rock and was shocked by what she saw. It was a gang of trolls washing their feet with her bottle of soap!

When they saw Gilda, they all grinned their biggest troll grins.

"Oh look," one of the trolls said, "apparently someone came to get their soap back."

Angela Creek wanted to join her grandson on his African safari. Her grandson, Jack, needed someone to travel to Africa with him to help carry his photo equipment and Angela strongly believed she needed to join him. Angela was seventy-seven years old and believed that everyone should get a chance to see the world.

Jack Creek didn't have a problem with his grandmother joining him on his photo expedition to Ghana. However, he didn't want her to overextend herself or become a nuisance to him. Jack knew his grandmother was more capable of causing a stampede of zebra or creeping up on a pride of lions than tiring from too much sun or excitement.

Angela prepared for her trip by going to the library. She browsed computer files and ordered as many books on Africa, Ghana, savannahs, and safaris as she possibly could. She gathered information from several travel books and journals. She cautioned her grandson against drinking the water and also made sure they both were updated in their inoculations.

As a result of her studies, Angela was prepared when they arrived in the capital city of Ghana two weeks later. Her mind was loaded with information about the country's customs, languages, and climate.

Angela knew that the official language of the Republic of Ghana was English, but that many indigenous languages were still spoken there. Angela was aware that the literacy rate in Ghana was nearly seventy percent. She shocked her grandson outside the airport when she spoke a few words to their safari tour leader in his native tongue. The result was a quicker ride to their hotel and a strong back to help them deposit their supplies in their rooms.

While her grandson took his award-winning photographs, Angela quietly immersed herself in the beauty of the savannah. She observed a pride of lions two hundred meters from their base camp as it skulked through the tall grass. She also took her own photos of the herds of zebra and colorful birds. Angela proved to be an excellent traveling companion for her grandson.

By the time I paid my first visit to the Herbal Shop on Bay Street, I was suffering from a number of ailments. My high fever, nausea, irritability, stiff neck, and scratchy throat were the least of my worries. I was mainly concerned with the black splotches that were clouding my vision and the strange growth of green fungus that had sprouted behind my ears.

I hesitantly staggered through the doors of the shop and proceeded to knock down a pyramid of pretty crystal bottles with my elbow. I sent them crashing to the ceramic floor and provoked a headache directly between my eyes.

Since there appeared to be nobody minding the shop, I had to tidy up the clutter myself. I neatly tucked the broken bottles, bits of herbs, and twigs in the garbage behind the counter, and was finally free to survey the cloudy bottles and mysterious vials crowding the shelves of the shop. I didn't really know what I was looking for, but I continued in my explorations and assumed someone would be out to assist me shortly.

I discovered thousands of cures! Packets of lavender to relieve tension and infusions of spearmint and peppermint to improve digestion. Bundles of rosehips for calcium and rosemary for good fortune.

"I'll purchase this and this and this," I thought to myself as I filled my arms and made dizzying circles around the dark room.

I wanted to try ginseng for my sluggish energy level, milkweed pods for my sensitive skin, and a special tea made out of willow bark for my migraines. I was in the middle of filling my third basket when I noticed a small man watching me from behind the counter.

"I'll take all of these," I told the small man. I couldn't wait to get out of there and start sampling all of my newly discovered miracle treatments.

The small man took one look at me and spoke three words, three words that put me back on the road to good health and ended the first of many costly visits to the Herbal Shop.

"Cash or charge?" he inquired as I quickly pulled a charge card from my wallet.

On a dark and stormy night, four shadowy figures made their way through the thick trees that shielded their ghostly torches from the wind gusting around them. Ever so slowly, the foursome traveled to their hidden grotto for another meeting of the Dead Writer's Society.

After they arrived, Sam slammed a gavel made of solid oak onto an old, dead tree stump and called the meeting to order. Secretary Sam opened the meeting in his usual manner.

"We now begin yet another tiresome meeting of the minds. I call upon anyone who wishes to chit-chat about books, philosophy, free thought, or sports to speak freely. This is an open forum and members may speak about anything relevant that comes to mind." Sam draped his garments around himself and sat upon the lower limb of a leafless elm.

Judd, the society's keeper of times, rose with the moon looming behind him. Judd had chosen his seat specifically for this purpose. The October moon occasionally broke through the pale clouds that covered the night sky and created a chillingly silhouetted effect.

Judd cleared the phlegm from his throat and hoarsely proclaimed, "I bring up the question of Shakespeare and whether the society affirms or denies that he is the best writer ever. It behooves the society to determine a stance in said matter."

The society members felt strongly about this subject, having spent many evenings debating the merits of the English playwright. Sam hooted like an owl and proclaimed, "I feel that Shakespeare is certainly one of the best writers ever."

In a regal manner, another member named Rob stated, "Clearly this writer is one of the best, along with Jack London, Edgar Allen Poe, and Mark Twain."

"I agree," Judd said. "But he is sometimes difficult to understand."

After several hours of conversation while the wind whipped at their campfire until it was extinguished, the four realized it was time for their meeting in the grotto to come to an end. With much discussion behind them, the meeting of the Dead Writer's Society agreed to meet again in two weeks. They held their candles aloft and in single-file fashion, headed back to their respective vehicles and drove off into the dark, stormy night.

It didn't take long for Sandy to realize the mice living in the walls of her new home were not normal. She couldn't understand how the mice eluded the traps she set out each night, or how they managed to eat every bit of the peanut butter she smeared on the trap's trigger mechanisms without getting hurt. She was puzzled by the way they magically got themselves into her sealed food containers. They always gobbled up the contents and somehow closed the containers again without making the slightest sound.

One afternoon, she came home from the shopping mall to find one of the mice watching her from the entryway chandelier. The mouse had absolutely no way to get up to the chandelier unless it had climbed the wall. The only explanation was that the mouse defied gravity and crawled across the ceiling!

Sandy couldn't help but notice that the mouse staring intelligently down at her from the chandelier was wearing a very tiny, very neatly stitched sweater and cowboy hat. Considering what she had just seen, she expected the mouse to speak to her, but instead it disappeared into thin air. That moment was a turning point for Sandy.

"Oh, boy," she said in disbelief. She could hardly believe her eyes.

That night, Sandy told her husband not to set any more mousetraps. All night long she listened to the mice running and frolicking within the walls. As she lay in her bed, she saw a couple of them whizzing across the hardwood floor. They were both wearing dresses and high heels and were carrying on a conversation about the neighbor's cat in high-pitched, squeaky English. Sandy was sure she was dreaming.

Early the next morning, to Sandy's surprise, she found that the crossword puzzle she'd left half-finished on her nightstand was completed and accurate. She also noticed that her checkbook was balanced, her broken watch was fixed, and the button that had fallen off her blouse had been sewed back on.

However, after walking through her kitchen, she noticed the cookies she made earlier in the week were missing from their container, and the bread she purchased yesterday from the market was nothing but crumbs.

Still, Sandy couldn't help looking at the watch on her wrist and wondering how the mice got to be so intelligent, well dressed, and helpful.

After moving to a new town, nine-year-old Samantha and her twelve-year-old brother Robert had heard of an old toboggan slide from some of the other neighborhood children. They decided they needed to check it out. Supposedly, it was on the northern side of the peninsula in the middle of the lake behind their new home.

Paddling lazily, they headed across the lake in their canoe. Just as they had been told, there was the decrepit, wooden-framed toboggan slide. The slide itself was barely wide enough to fit a toboggan. It left only a couple of inches to spare on either side before adjoining a short, wooden sidewall about six inches in height that kept the toboggans from falling off. Hundreds of steep steps climbed the shoreline to the top of the slide. Looking down from the top, it was evident that the slide abruptly ended approximately six feet above the water.

Since they didn't have a toboggan, they improvised with a piece of cardboard. Robert went first and flew down the slide. He used his feet against the side rails to stop the contraption before catapulting himself into the muddy water below. Samantha went next but her momentum was too great and she shot off the edge into the water. Samantha's immediate thought after bobbing to the surface was "Blood-suckers!" Her second thought was, "This is all Robert's fault!" She frantically climbed out of the water and ripped off her socks and shoes to look for blood-sucking worms. After finding none, but fearing they were still lurking in her shoes, she refused to put them back on.

"Put your shoes on," Robert insisted. "Put your shoes on or you'll never be able to walk back to the canoe." Samantha refused. Finally, either from a desire to be gallant or from fear of repercussions from their parents, Robert picked up Samantha. He carried her to the canoe and quickly paddled home. After a steamy bath and the reassurance that there weren't any blood-sucking worms hidden anywhere, Samantha told the story to their parents with a great deal of enthusiasm. She forgot entirely that she had originally blamed Robert for everything and made him the hero of her story.

Peculiar things can happen when you don't watch where you're going. My name is Winifred, and one day while I was tromping home from school, minding my own business, I plummeted through a trapdoor into another realm.

Maybe if I'd been paying attention to my surroundings instead of worrying about my mom's reaction to my failing grade on my arithmetic test, I wouldn't have stumbled. Maybe if I'd listened attentively to my teacher, Miss Pinch, instead of daydreaming out the window during her arithmetic review yesterday, I wouldn't have had anything to worry about in the first place.

But there I was, fretting about what my mom would say when I told her the bad news, when suddenly I heard an owl hoot from one of the buildings above me. I quickly glanced up, and then it happened. Before I could return my gaze to my sneakers, I'd already stepped through the trapdoor in the sidewalk and was tumbling down further and further through layers of blackness.

I hit the spongy ground of another world with a hard thump.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in the middle of a deep, echoing, green forest. The tree trunks were bigger than my mom's car, the mushrooms rivaled our dishwasher, and the ladybugs could have eaten my dog for breakfast.

"I must be hallucinating," I said to myself quietly.

"You're not dreaming, Winifred," said a voice from the shadows. "You weren't paying attention, that's all. Now you've happened to stumble into Daydream Land."

"Excuse me?" I asked, standing up wobbly on my feet. "Who's speaking to me?" Before the aloof voice could answer, I realized I'd fallen down right next to someone's gigantic boot. The boot was connected to an ankle, the ankle to a leg, and the leg to a colossal woman lounging around on the forest floor.

"Have I got your attention now, Winifred?" she asked as I realized she resembled Miss Pinch.

When she saw the look on my face, the giant woman laughed and crawled closer. She plucked me off my feet and held me up to her face as if I weighed nothing.

"We'll start with multiplication," she informed me. "Please pay attention this time."

Peter could feel the train's engine straining as it chugged slowly up the hill. All day the train had followed an arrow-straight course across the flat prairies of the Great Plains. For Peter, they were horribly boring miles of emptiness that were taking him far away from home. He missed the forests and lakes in the areas near his hometown. He also missed his family terribly, even his bratty little sister.

Peter was extremely excited last January when he walked through waist-high snowdrifts to the mailbox and found a packet of information about employment waiting for him in Montana. He'd wanted an adventure, and there it was in the mailbox on a frigid winter day. Peter felt that an exotic summer job away from home would be just the thing he needed.

He'd eagerly filled out the forms and waited for a reply. At the end of April, after what seemed like forever and just as he was about to give up hope, the letter of acceptance arrived. The letter proudly announced that in June he would be off to Glacier Park in Montana. Peter was ecstatic! But after several euphoric weeks, doubts began to arise. While he would be thousands of miles from home, his friends would still be here. He would be in Montana all alone. Suddenly, home looked better than it ever had before.

But how could he turn back now, especially after he had bragged to his friends about the exciting adventure he was going to have? If he quit now, they would all think he was a mama's boy who couldn't bear to be separated from his family. He decided he needed to prove to everyone that he could do this, but as the train to Montana rolled on, his depression and loneliness increased.

Finally the train reached the top of the hill and Peter could feel the engine working easier. He sighed, lowered the book he'd been reading, and glanced out the window. What he saw took his breath away. There, stretching off into the distance, were majestic snow-covered mountains. The sun was just setting, making them glow with a soft golden light. It was an awesome sight. "Well," he thought to himself, "maybe, just maybe, this won't be so bad after all."



Madam Zelda's Sweet Shop is located on the corner of Sugar Street South and Spice Avenue in a busy neighborhood of lower Manhattan. This lucky location is great for business. The bells over the red doors of her shop are rarely still. There is hardly a moment when the chimes of her cash register aren't echoing throughout her store.

Madam Zelda has mastered the process of refining large bricks of base chocolate imported straight from Brazil. With a chemist's eye for measurement and a treat lover's sweet tooth, Zelda excitedly blends chocolate, sugar, vanilla, and milk. There's nothing she loves more than coaxing one of her sweet mixtures to a slow boil in one of the copper vats that sits on a back burner on her large stove. She adores decorating her small sweets with sprinkles and sugar. Sometimes she's up until dawn making taffy or dozens of her famous coffeecakes.

All of her hard work and attention to detail has really paid off for her. People come from all around to try a sample of the smooth frostings and silver icings she applies to her cakes and cookies. They travel great distances to purchase her chocolate curls, chunks of fudge, orange twists, and endless kinds of sugared fruits that she neatly displays in her store's front window.

It certainly isn't money that keeps Madam Zelda on her strict schedule. Oh, no, she does it for her customers. She wouldn't dream of not finding the finest crystal sugar for her sugared almonds, or melting the best brown sugars for peanut brittle every Wednesday. She happily bakes a dozen loaves of her spiral cinnamon bread for the man who comes in every Tuesday with his dog tucked under his arm. She carefully prepares a gallon of sweet chocolate espresso for the group of teenage schoolgirls who come in every weeknight. She also makes bags of chocolate almonds and packets of chocolate rose leaves for the mail carrier who delivers her mail daily, in any kind of weather.

To Madam Zelda, a smile is one of the sweetest things in life, and nothing makes her happier than sharing her tasty treats with everyone.

Even though it was the end of May, the sky was overcast and there was a chill in the air. The girls' softball team quickly ran out onto the field. The Middleton Giants' team spirit was very high. The team was playing their archrivals, the Deltown Panthers, the only team to beat them all season. If the Giants won today, they would tie for the conference championship. That would be a great achievement considering the varsity team was made up of eighth and ninth graders.

Miriam ran out to her position at shortstop before the game started and took several practice throws to first base to try and eliminate the butterflies in her stomach. She knew Deltown was good; they'd been conference champions for the last four years. However, Miriam remembered the Giants had lost to them by only two runs earlier in the season and she knew they could beat them now.

The butterflies did not leave Miriam's stomach throughout the early innings of the game. Both teams were playing exceptionally well with strong pitching and tough defense. With every crack of a Panther player's bat, Miriam was on edge. The Giants couldn't afford to let someone on base because of an error, and Miriam knew the majority of balls would be coming her way.

Finally it was the bottom of the seventh with the score tied at three runs each. The Panther fans were in a panic as the Giants came up for their last at bat. The Giants fans were excited. The fans had watched their team develop into champion material over the past two years, and now the team had a chance to prove it.

It was now Miriam's turn to bat. There were runners on first and second and the team had only one out. All Miriam had to do was get a base hit to score the winning run. As the pitch flew over the plate, Miriam swung her bat. Suddenly, everything seemed to go into slow motion. The ball went perfectly into the gap between the first and second bases. The runner on second was being waved home and the crowd was on its feet. They'd done it! As Miriam stepped solidly on first base, she realized she no longer had a stomach full of butterflies.