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Short Story Unit Overview

Overall Curriculum Expectations

- During this unit, we will have class discussions about a variety of texts. During these discussions, I will be looking at the following overall expectations:

Oral Communication
1. **Listening to Understand:** listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes; 2. **Speaking to Communicate:** use speaking skills and strategies appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes; 3. **Reflecting on Skills and Strategies:** reflect on and identify their strengths as listeners and speakers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in oral communication situations.

- The study of English requires reading; in this unit, we will focus on the form and style of the essay and the short story. I will be looking at these overall expectations:

Reading and Literature Studies
1. **Reading for Meaning:** read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, informational, and graphic texts, using a range of strategies to construct meaning; 2. **Understanding Form and Style:** recognize a variety of text forms, text features, and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they help communicate meaning; 3. **Reading With Fluency:** use knowledge of words and cueing systems to read fluently 4. **Reflecting on Skills and Strategies:** reflect on and identify their strengths as readers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful before, during, and after reading.

- Not all texts will require a written response, but any writing generated and submitted will be examined using these expectations:

Writing
1. **Developing and Organizing Content:** generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience; 2. **Using Knowledge of Form and Style:** draft and revise their writing, using a variety of literary, informational, and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience;

3. **Applying Knowledge of Conventions:** use editing, proofreading, and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression, and present their work effectively;
4. **Reflecting on Skills and Strategies:** reflect on and identify their strengths as writers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful at different stages in the writing process.

- Some of the short stories or essays may branch into the generation or examination of media texts. These will be framed within the following expectations:

Media Studies

1. **Understanding Media Texts:** demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts;
2. **Understanding Media Forms, Conventions, and Techniques:** identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning;
3. **Creating Media Texts:** create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques;
4. **Reflecting on Skills and Strategies:** reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding and creating media texts.

Assessment and Evaluation

- Assessment ***for*** learning: descriptive feedback and coaching for improvement
- Assessment ***as*** learning: helping students develop their capacity to be independent, autonomous learners who are able to set individual goals, monitor their own progress, determine next steps, and reflect on their thinking and learning.
- Assessment ***of*** learning: the assessment that becomes public and results in statements and symbols about how well students are doing.
- Evaluation: the process of judging the quality of student learning on the basis of established performance standards and assigning a value to represent that quality. It is based on assessment *of* learning. Evaluation focuses on students' achievement of the overall expectations.

-From *Growing Success* (2010)

Short Stories: Characteristics

1. A short story is short. Only important or significant details are included. The number of characters is limited.
2. A short story concentrates largely on one character, one place, and one theme.
3. The short story must quickly involve the reader in the character and the action.
4. In a short story, a brief space of time is covered. The story needs to begin as close to the climax as possible.
5. A short story has a well-defined plot.
6. These elements can be part of a short story: plot, theme, characters, setting, and atmosphere.

Characters in a Short Story: Antagonist and Protagonist

Short stories use few characters. One character is clearly central to the story with all major events having some importance to this character - he/she is the PROTAGONIST. The character who opposes the main character is called the ANTAGONIST.

- Think of some protagonists from films/books you have viewed.
- Think of some antagonists from films/books you have viewed.

Setting
-Time (era, season, time of day)
-Place (country, city, room/space)
-Atmosphere/Mood (sinister, happy, tense)

1. Sets up the location and evokes feelings from the reader.
2. Illustrates ideas about the culture or society surrounding the character.
3. Influences the characters' actions because they are a part of the larger society.
4. Could reflect characters' thoughts or feelings – "inner landscape"
5. Historical background helps the reader understand the character's motivations.
6. Foreshadows events in the plot.
7. Could establish the conflict which will develop the plot.

How Character is Developed

1. Narrator – tells us the physical description, personality traits, feelings.

2. Character's actions – by themselves, with others, reactions

3. Dialogue – is what the character says different from what he or she thinks? Who is he or she talking to?

4. Character's thoughts

5. What other characters say about him or her.

6. Images or symbols associated with the character.

7. Setting – reflects character

8. Character foil – another character who is the opposite; this helps define the main character through contrast (example: good vs. evil)

Conflict

For each of the following think of your own example (can be from your life or from a text or movie).

Person vs. Person

Person vs. Society

Person vs. Nature

Person vs. Self

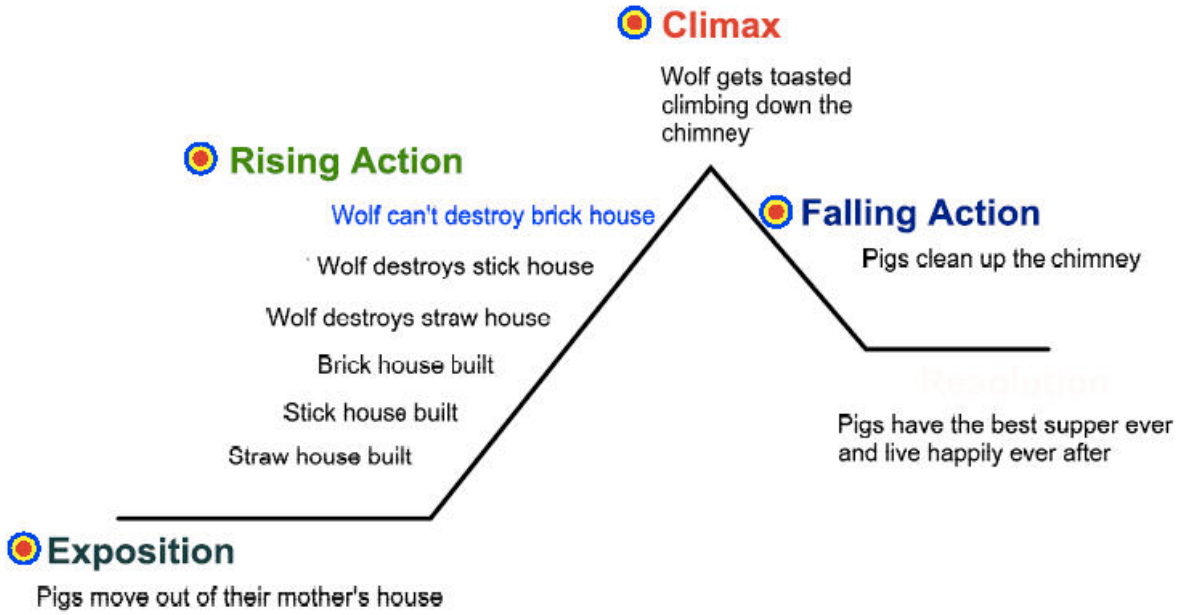
Person vs. Technology

What is Conflict?

Conflict is the clashing of opposing opinions, interests or desires. This must be established early in a short story; this can be a trap or obstacle the hero (protagonist) must overcome. The conflict creates suspense and drives the plot.

Plot Graph

Being able to map out the plot of a short story shows that you understand how it is constructed and can identify various elements. Here is a plot graph based on the story "The Three Little Pigs."



Point of View

The point of view, or POV, is defined as the angle from which the story is told.

1. *Innocent Eye* - The story is told through the eyes of a child (his/her judgment being different from that of an adult).

2. *Stream of Consciousness* - The story is told so that the reader feels as if they are inside the head of one character and knows all their thoughts and reactions.

3. *First Person* - The story is told by the protagonist or one of the characters who interacts closely with the protagonist or other characters (using pronouns I, me, we, etc). The reader sees the story through this person's eyes as he/she experiences it and only knows what he/she knows or feels.

4. *Omniscient*- The author can narrate the story using the omniscient point of view. He can move from character to character, event to event, having free access to the thoughts, feelings and motivations of his characters and he introduces information where and when he chooses.

How Can You Tell?

The point of view depends upon who the narrator is and how much he or she knows. The point of view may be:

- **First person** - uses "I" - A *character is telling* the story.
- **Second person** - uses "you" - The *author speaks directly to the reader*. Second person is seldom used; it is found most often in nonfiction today.
- **Third person** - uses "he," "she," or "it" - The *author is telling about* the characters. There are three third person points of view:
- **Limited omniscient** - We are told the thoughts and feelings of only one character (sometimes, but very seldom, of two or three characters).
- **Omniscient** - We are told everything about the story, including the thoughts and feelings of all the characters, and even information in the author's mind which no character knows.
- **Dramatic** or **objective** - We are told only *what happens* and *what is said*; we do not know any thoughts or feelings of the characters. It is called "dramatic" because it includes the words and actions, just what you would see and hear if it were in a play or film.

Foreshadowing

Authors often use **foreshadowing,** or leave hints in their short stories and novels about what might happen next. Foreshadowing increases the suspense and makes you anxious to read on to find out what might happen. In movies, a lot of foreshadowing is done with music, especially in horror movies. The music will clue in the viewer that something is about to happen. Authors do this the same way with words. Many times, the foreshadowing isn't known until the end of the story, where the reader says, "Ah, I should have seen that coming."

Theme

The theme in a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the author's underlying meaning or main idea that he or she is trying to convey. The theme may be the author's thoughts about a topic or view of human nature. The title of the short story usually points to what the writer is saying and s/he may use various figures of speech to emphasize his theme, such as: symbol, allusion, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, or irony.

Some simple examples of common themes from literature, TV, and film are:

- Growing Up/Maturing
- Love is Blind
- Believe in Yourself
- Fear of Change
- Don't Judge a Book by its Cover
- Friendship
- Greed
- Loyalty
- Power
- Good vs. Evil



"Short Story"

Kath and Mouse

-Janet McNaughton

Her name was Helen, but Kath called her Mouse from her very first day at our school. "What is that Mouse doing at our table?" Kath said loudly, so Helen would know she had already broken one of the most important rules. No one sat at Kath's table without an invitation. I expected her to skitter away, like anyone else would, but instead she looked up and smiled. She did look like a mouse, with mouse-brown hair and small, sharp features but that smile said, maybe you could like me. So I ignored Kath, slide past the others, and sat down.

"Hi," I said, "My name's Kevin."

Then everyone else sat down. Even Kath. I didn't look at her, but I could feel the anger steaming off her. That winter, I seemed to be the only one who knew how to do things Kath didn't want. I had a secret weapon though, I'm her twin brother. And that winter, it seemed to be my job to prove you didn't get vapourized or turned into a frog if you did something that made Kath angry.

"Ready for the big concert?" I asked Renee across from me. I was trying to make things normal. Renee rolled her eyes and the conversation took off. She played percussion in the school band. I played trumpet, but I wasn't serious about it. Piano is really my instrument. Kath played oboe. It's a hard instrument and even I had to admit she was starting to get good. It wasn't just natural talent either. She really worked at it, forty-five minutes every day. Not that anyone else knew. If anyone phoned while she was practising, we were supposed to say she was out.

Renee and I talked about the concert until things seemed pretty normal. I was just beginning to relax when Kath spoke.

"So Helen, do you play an instrument?" She put such a sneer in her voice that everyone at the table fell silent, waiting to see how this new kid would react.

When Helen spoke, her voice was very quiet. "No," she said, "No instrument. I just sing."

Kath snorted. "Sing! No choir in this school. Guess you're out of luck." Kath stood up then, to signal that the eating part of lunch was over. Everyone else at the table picked up their trays, following her like robots. Everyone except me and Helen, who now reminded me of a mouse I'd had to take away from our cat once, wounded.

"You could probably play in band if you wanted," I said, "Even this late. Mrs. Cromwell is really nice."

Helen shook her head. "No. I talked it over with Mom after Dad left. Voice is good for someone who moves a lot. I guess we won't move much now that we're in Torbay. The instrument is free and it isn't hard to

move." She smiled, as if this were an old joke. Then she lifted her chin. "Besides, I'm a very good singer." The pride in her voice made her sound completely different. I was so surprised, I just nodded.

I hoped Kath would leave Helen alone, but I was dreaming. She started on Helen's backpack in the school bus on the way home. I was pretty odd looking, made of heavy, faded cloth, like denim, only pink. A name, "Robyn," was written on the flap in ballpoint pen. Kath leaned over the seat to stare at it. I was sitting across the aisle from Helen.

"Who's Robyn, Mouse?" Kath asked.

Helen ducked her head like she'd been hit. "I don't know."

"Where'd you get the backpack then?"

Helen kept her head down. "At a garage sale," she said. "I like it," she added.

"Right," Kath said, "It's so...unique." Everyone laughed.

By the time we got off the bus, I was so mad I could hardly see straight. "Who made you queen of the world?" I yelled at Kath in the driveway.

She didn't even bother to get angry. She just gave me a look that made me feel cold all over and said, "It doesn't matter, does it? I just am, so you better get used to it," and walked away.

I knew something was up in gym the next day the way Kath and her friends came out of the change room giggling. Then Amanda asked Ms. Sao to help her find some goal gloves in the storage room. As soon as they disappeared, Kath shot a soccer ball at Helen, hard. Helen dodged as Jen opened the gym door behind her. The ball flew out. "Oops," Jen said. I think I'll help look for those goal gloves."

Helen stood near the open door.

"Go get the ball, you klutz," Kath ordered. "It's getting cold in here." I was standing across the gym, by the boys' change room. Helen hesitated, then did what Kath said. As soon as she stepped outside, another of Kath's friends closed the door. It was about ten below zero. Everyone else saw what happened. Nobody did anything. It only took half a minute for me to jog across the gym and open the door, but Helen was already shivering. I took the ball from her and hurried her inside.

I slammed the soccer ball down and kicked it so hard it flew all the way across the gym. "One more trick like that," I yelled at Kath, "And I tell. I mean it."

"Kevin, you're such a baby," Kath said. "We're just having fun." But I thought she looked worried.

After that, Kath was more careful. She had classes with Helen that I wasn't in. She knew she could do what she wanted, and no one would tell me. And it occurred to me that Kath might be mean to Helen just to bother me, so I backed off. I couldn't spend my life keeping track of Kath. Anyway,

I had a piano conservatory exam coming up. It was nice to be able to just sit and play. The music was hard, but it was never mean.

Maybe Kath thought she could be queen of the school forever, but she made a mistake. Kath made fun of a girl named Christine, just once; more specifically, her ears. Christine was a good athlete, and popular. She started having parties. Sleepovers, horror movie parties, even dances. Kath was never invited. Christine wasn't mean; she just acted like Kath didn't exist. Kath tried to pretend it didn't matter, but it did. I knew when she came to me one Saturday night and said, "Dad will drive us into St. John's. Do you want to see a movie?"

"Aren't you afraid someone will see us together?" I teased.

She shrugged. "Everyone else was invited to Christine's."

That was truer than she knew. I'd been invited myself. But I didn't go and I didn't tell Kath. She was still my sister. "Let's go," I said, "But I pick the movie."

The next week, posters went up for a talent show to raise money for new library books. Overnight, our school changed. Suddenly, the halls were full of step dancers, clumsy jugglers, bad magic acts – everyone had a hidden talent, mostly ones they should have kept hidden. I thought about playing something from the conservatory exam, but it wasn't going to be that sort of night. I was pretty surprised when Helen came to me. I'd almost forgotten about her by then.

"You play piano, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I do."

"Could you play this?" she showed me sheet music for "My Heart Will Go On," from *Titanic*. I almost told her nobody wanted to hear an old song like that, but, then I thought, sheet music is expensive. So I opened it up instead. It looked medium hard.

"You want to sing at the talent show?" Helen bit her lip, but then she nodded.

"Give me a week to practise. Then we'll try it together, okay?"

Her smile changed her face completely. "Thank you," she said, "That would be great," and she was gone.

I'd never really listened to the song but the more I played the music, the more I liked it.

"That's a switch," Kath said when she heard me one night. "I thought that piano only played Bach."

"Ha, ha," I said. "If you'll excuse me," and I started to play again, loudly, so she couldn't ask questions.

Helen found a church basement where we could practise without anybody knowing. The piano was badly out of tune. Helen's voice was thin and nervous. We sounded awful.

"It's pretty good," I told her.

Her look told me she knew how bad we were. "Maybe I should sit down," she said. "My knees are knocking."

She sounded better, but the piano was still awful. "We should practice at my place," I told her.

She laughed. "Right, and afterwards, your sister could have me for supper. As the main course."

"I don't know why she's like that," I said. Helen shook her head.

"I don't either. I used to think maybe the girls picking on me were secretly miserable or something, but lately, I'm not sure."

"You don't have to prove yourself, you know," I said.

"But maybe I want to. Let's try one more time."

That night after supper, Kath made an announcement. "I've decided to audition for the talent show," she said.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Kathryn Morris and her magic oboe."

"Funny Kevin, but I'm not playing the oboe. I'm going to sing."

She watched me carefully while she said this, so I willed myself not to react.

"Aren't you going to offer to accompany me?" she asked.

"No, I'm not."

"I thought I might try that song you've been playing."

"It's not available."

"Kevin, that's mean." Kath looked like she might cry. She wasn't used to hearing no. I felt bad, but I couldn't explain. I was afraid of what Kath might do to Helen.

When she finally realized I was serious, she turned away. "Be that way then. It's not as if I need you."

At the audition, everyone was edgy. Girls in strange costumes giggled while they worked through bad dance moves, guys with decks of cards walked around muttering to themselves. Helen looked pale. "Want to give it a run-through?" I nodded towards the piano.

She shook her head. "I'd rather wait."

I don't know when Kath slipped into the room. She was dressed in hippie clothes and carried our father's battered old acoustic guitar. When she saw me with Helen, she waved me over. "This is why you wouldn't play for me?"

I nodded.

"I thought you were just being mean."

"No, Kath," I said. "I wasn't being mean. Truce?"

"Okay, truce."

Then people started disappearing towards the stage. After an act was auditioned, kids could stay in the audience if they were quiet. Three acts waited in the wings ahead of time. Kath was three acts ahead of us, so we got to see her. She sang an old Bob Dylan song, "Blowing in the Wind," and

played three-chord guitar. It wasn't very good. When she finished, the applause was limp. A few months before, Kath would have brought the house down with the exact same song.

Two acts later, it was our turn. Helen didn't look pale anymore. He looked green. As I put the music on the piano, she rushed off-stage. For a minute, I thought she'd bolted, but she came back with a stool to sit on. Out in the audience, I saw Kath. When she smiled, she looked like the sister I'd always wanted.

What happened next was magic. With the piano in tune, Helen didn't have to struggle. Her voice blended and soared with the music, and for the first time, I understood what a terrific singer she was. She did too. Halfway through the song, she stood up, walked to the edge of the stage and sang to the audience like she'd been there every day of her life. When the final chords died, there was a deep silence then long applause. "My goodness," Mrs. Cromwell said. "That was lovely."

When we came off-stage, Christine came over to slap Helen on the back. "You've got to sing at my party Saturday! Say you'll come."

Helen nodded shyly.

I had a feeling no one would ever call her Mouse again. I looked at Kath, sitting alone. Queen of nothing now. So I went and sat beside her.

McNaughton, Janet. "Kath and Mouse." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 62-67. Print.

Babysitting Helen

-Kathy Stinson

It wasn't till Trish was talking on the phone to Gavin about their plan for Saturday that her mother told her she would be babysitting that night. Trish covered the mouthpiece. "I can't, Mom. I'm going out with Gavin."

"I already said you'd do it."

"Without even asking me?"

"Barb Stanley needs someone to stay with Helen for a few hours."

"Gavin, can I call you back? Yeah, love you too, bye." Trish picked her books up from the counter and hugged them to her chest. "You said I would babysit Barb's *mother*? That weird old lady who came for lunch and kept going 'Isn't that marvellous?' every time she made the wooden gull flap its wings?

"It's just for a few hours. Barb said Helen will probably sleep the whole time. And Trish," her mother argued, "you do see Gavin every day." Trish stomped upstairs to her room. Didn't mothers know anything about *love*?

Trish shoved her homework and a couple of tapes into her knapsack, just in case Gavin wasn't home when she called him from Helen's. She threw on her coat and flung her knapsack over her shoulder.

Helen was awake when Trish arrived. She was watching TV. Four bright coloured barrettes–pink and red rabbits–were stuck haphazardly into her wispy white hair. Her brown sweater was on inside out.

Barb ushered Trish into the kitchen. "Mom had a longer nap than usual this afternoon," she said. "She wanted to make a cake this morning. I guess it tired her out. I'm sorry," Barb explained, "but with the long nap..."

"Does she know who I am?" Trish interrupted. "Won't she think it's kind of weird having a babysitter?"

"I'm afraid Mom doesn't know who many people are any more," Barb said. "And you can just tell her you came over to watch TV."

Trish shook her head. "What's with the barrettes?"

"My granddaughter left them here last weekend." Barb scribbled a phone number on a pad by the phone. "And for some reason, Mom has decided there's going to be a party tonight. So, just play along, okay? She'll get tired soon without anything actually happening." As she slipped out the back door Barb added, "Don't let her out of your sight for more than a few minutes, eh? She gets into things."

Right.

"Thank you for coming, Trish."

In the living room Helen was fixed on the TV. Trish sat down where she'd be able to watch them both. Crayons and old-fashioned stickers were scattered over the coffee table. Barb must have dug them out of some old box for the granddaughter's visit last weekend, Trish figured. And that must be her, the granddaughter–the little girl in the photo on the piano.

"Are you here for the party?" Helen said.

"Um, yeah."

"Your outfit is lovely."

Trish glanced down at her jeans and the old sweatshirt she only wore when she knew she wouldn't run into anybody that mattered. "Thanks. Um. You look lovely too."

Helen laughed. She was a tiny woman but her laugh came from deep inside and went on and on.

Trish wondered what she'd said that was so funny. "Would you just look at that!" Trish followed Helen's gaze to the TV, where mechanical pink rabbit was marching across the screen beating a drum. "Isn't that the darndest thing?"

For the next fifteen minutes Trish and Helen watched "Golden Girls". Helen sat quietly through the funnniest bits and laughed when nothing funny was happening at all. She seemed to like the commercials better than the show, and when the battery bunny started across the screen with his drum again, Helen laughed and exclaimed, "Would you just look at that! Isn't that the darndest thing?"

Trish pretended to laugh along at the boring rabbit with its ability to keep on going and going and going.

When the rabbit stopped, Helen got up and looked out the window. "Where is everyone?"

"Barb just went out for a little while," Trish said. "She'll be back soon. Why don't you come watch the rest of your show?" Or better yet, she thought, why don't you go to bed so I can call Gavin?

"Where do you live?" Helen demanded to know. Before Trish could answer, Helen asked, "You live at the bottom of our garden, don't you?"

"Well actually," Trish said, "I live up the street. You know the Carters? They're my parents."

"At the bottom of the garden," Helen said. "That's just what I thought." Then she wandered away in the direction of the kitchen.

Trish could hear canisters being moved around on the counter and the scraping of a chair across the tiled floor. Don't leave her alone, Barb had said. But she couldn't check up on a grown woman like she was some two-year-old. As a peach-skinned model on the TV smoothed moisturizer onto her cheeks, Trish concentrated on the sounds in the kitchen. When something heavy banged against the counter and onto the floor, Trish leapt from her chair, thinking 911.

She found Helen standing on the counter. "Dear, would just pass me that tin of beans that fell?" Helen said.

Trish held up a hand, as if it might keep Helen from falling, and retrieved the tin from under the edge of the cupboards.

"Helen, it's time to come down now." Trish's heart had stopped beating, but from her mouth came her calm trying-to-reason-with-a-three-year-old voice. "Take my hands, I'll help you."

Helen turned back to the open cupboard. "But I haven't found what I'm looking for."

If Helen fell, she'd break something for sure. And if she broke a hip– well, didn't old people get pneumonia and die if they had to stay in bed for too long?

"What are you looking for?" Trish asked, fighting not to cry. "Maybe I can find it for you."

Helen stared into the cupboard for a long moment. "I've forgotten." Her knees shaking, she reached her hands down to Trish. "My mind–" She leaned against Trish as she lowered herself to the chair pushed up against the counter. "It's not what it used to be, you know."

Surprised at how little Helen weighed, Trish lifted her the rest of the way down. She felt Helen's feet touch the ground, a rush of relief. She wanted to hug Helen. She wished, unexpectedly and momentarily that her own mother was there to hug her.

Trish picked the canisters up off the floor, where Helen had set them out of her way, and returned them to the counter. "Would you like a piece of chocolate cake?"

"Would that help my mind, do you think?"

"It can't hurt," Trish said. "You get some plates and I'll cut the cake."

Trish was pushing the knife through the layers of chocolate when Helen said, "I don't think we can do that yet." She touched her hands to the pink and red rabbits in her hair. "Everyone isn't here."

"Right." Trish followed Helen back to the living room.

Helen picked up the photo of Barb's little granddaughter on the piano. "We used to have such lovely parties. She adored getting all fancied up." Helen held the photo closer to her face. "I don't remember that dress though."

"Who do you think–?" Trish swallowed. "Who is that in the picture, Helen?"

"Why, it's Barbara. Do you know Barbara?" She set the photo back on the piano. "Of course, you live in the bottom of the garden, don't you. You can go home now if you'd like."

"No, I think...I think I'd like to stay–" Trish took a deep breath, "for the party."

Helen smoothed her skirt and sat down in front of the TV. "I love parties, don't you?" There was effort in her words. When the battery bunny came on she said, "Would you just look at that. Isn't that the darndest thing?" But her eyes were without laughter. Trish knew how upset and out of control little kids got when they were up much past bedtime. Would Helen

get like that if she got overtired trying to stay up, waiting for something that wasn't going to happen?

"Maybe you'd like to go to bed now," Trish suggested.

"You know I can't miss the party." The look in Helen's eyes reminded Trish of a TV movie she'd seen in which a girl, all dolled up, was starting to realize no one was going to show up for her party. "Not," Helen said, composing herself, "after you've gone to so much trouble."

Trish looked at her watch. Barb wouldn't be home for another two hours. Should she–could she–try to give Helen her party?

Trish slid onto the piano bench and slowly, softly, started to pick out the notes of the first party song that came to her. *Hap-py birth-day to you, Hap-py birth-day to you*...Standing beside Trish, Helen began to move her head back and forth to the rhythm. *Hap-py birth-day, Hap-py birth-day*...Helen swayed, her eyes closed, and a trembling smile on her lips, as Trish played.

It's working, Trish thought. If this will keep Helen happy, I'll play all night. But in the middle of the next time through, Helen stopped moving and opened her eyes. Her expression was cross.

"What is it? Do you want me to stop playing?"

"Your party is lovely." Helen placed her hands on her hips. "But it's not much of a party without hats, now is it."

Party hats? She'd never find any in this house. Trish piced up the TV guide. "I wonder if there are any good movies on tonight."

"Every good party," Helen insisted, "has hats."

What was it with this party thing? Helen couldn't concentrate on anything for more than two minutes, but she was determined there was going to be a party–with hats. Trish sighed. Party hats. Party hats.

In the kitchen cupboard she had seen paper plates. She'd brought pencil crayons for her map homework–Helen was supposed to be asleep–and of course, there were the stickers and crayons too.

"Look," said Trish. "We'll make hats." She knelt beside the coffee table. "With these stickers, we'll make beautiful hats."

"I can make a hat!" Helen grabbed a plate and a sticker. "You live in the bottom of the garden, don't you."

"Yes," Trish said. "Will you come and visit me there some day?"

"That would be lovely, dear." Helen rubbed the sticker over her tongue.

"Not too much," Trish said. "You'll lick off all the glue."

"I know that!" Helen laughed from deep inside.

Trish watched as Helen stuck stickers on her paper plate, licking and sticking, licking and sticking, one after another till two paper plates were covered. Please, energetic bunny, you've got to wear down soon.

Trish tied Helen's hat around her head.

"You too," Helen insisted.

"There," Trish said, her hat in place. "Now, ready for bed?"

"Don't be silly." Helen planted herself firmly beside the piano. "The party is just beginning!" Helen swayed through the first round of "Happy Birthday". The second time Trish played it, Helen's feet were lifting off the ground. The third time, she was swaying in circles, a spring in every step.

Trish played on as Helen danced. And then Helen began to sing. *Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you.* Her voice was strong, her face radiant. *Happy birthday, dear Ed-ward,* she belted out, *Happy Birthday to yoo-oouu!*

When Barb came home, Trish was watching "Saturday Night Live" and colouring in the continents on her geography map. Beside her on the sofa, Helen was asleep, chocolate cake crumbs on her chest, homemade party hat perched on her head.

Barb eyed the three plates on the coffee table. Each held a fork, a few crumbs, and a birthday candle. "Did you have company?"

"I'm–not exactly."

Barb rummaged in her purse. "I'm sorry if Mom gave you a hard time."

Trish crumpled the money Barb handed her into the pocket of her jeans. "She's a neat lady." Careful not to disturb any of the stickers, Trish slid the hat Helen had made for her into her knapsack. "I'll come back and party with her any time." Trish opened the door to leave. "Barb?" she asked, "Who is Edward?"

"Edward? My father's name was Edward." Barb looked at Trish, puzzled. "Why?"

"That's who the party was for tonight," Trish said.

"Dad died two years ago."

"But when was his birthday?"

"November 24th. That's–"

Trish nodded. "Tonight."

From the sofa came a contented sigh. Barb and Trish turned. Helen was smiling in her sleep.

Stinson, Kathy. "Babysitting Helen." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 300-305. Print.

Coffee, Snacks, Worms

-Karleen Bradford

Stephanie took a step backwards, then stopped. She looked behind her and gasped in terror. The cliff edge crumbled beneath her feet, and far below her the sea crashed around the jagged, pointed rocks in an insane fury.

"No!" she cried.

But the terrible form of her pursuer advanced remorselessly. His hands reached out for her throat…. She could feel his hot breath burning her cheeks… There was no escape…!

"Kate, you dodo! It's your stop! You're home!"

Kate came back to reality with a jolt and grabbed for her books. Flushing, she clambered over her seatmate and struggled along the aisle toward the bus door.

"Bye, Kate!"

"See you tomorrow, Kate!"

The cries followed her.

"Call me with the answers when you've finished the math homework!"

Kate gave Jeff Hodges a withering glance. The top math student in the class, he never missed an opportunity to embarrass Kate or put her down. Only that day he had made a fool of her by deliberately drawing the teacher's attention to her when he knew she wasn't listening.

"Daydreaming again, Kate?" Mrs. Richards had asked impatiently.

Daydreaming! She hadn't been daydreaming. She'd been plotting out a fabulous story. For some reason that seemed to annoy Jeff Hodges intensely.

Without bothering to answer him she fought her way through the bus and stepped off onto the road.

She stopped for a moment and looked at the buildings in front of her. Home. A crummy little garage and snack bar, sitting all alone like an unwelcome wart on the side of a dusty Ontario highway. Painted in board, garish, vertical orange and white strips. As if it didn't stick out enough already. A stack of useless looking tires leaned against a drooping air hose that had stopped working months ago. A peeling, creaking sign in front of the snack bar read:

COFFEE
SNACKS
WORMS

Coffee, snacks, worms! That was her whole life? Her whole life had *been* coffee, snacks, worms. Her whole life was *going* to be coffee, snacks, worms. It was the most boring life in the whole world. This was the most boring place in the whole world. Nothing ever happened here. She hated it.

With every fibre of her whole being, she hated every single orange and white stripe!

Heaving a sign of anger and frustration, Kate slouched around the horrible building and slammed through the back door into her family's living quarters.

"Kate, I have to take Jimmy to the dentist and Jesse hasn't shown up." Her mother was waiting for her with an even more worried expression than usual on her face. "Could you take care of the snack bar for an hour or so by yourself? I hate to leave you alone. Your dad's not here, but he's shut the gas station down so you don't have to worry about that. Can you manage? It shouldn't be for long… Do you mind…?"

What difference did it make if she did. There was no one else. She'd have to take over.

"Sure, Mom," she muttered. Throwing her books down on the couch, she went on through into the snack bar.

There were only two customers there, both almost finished. Kate took their money, shrugged when neither one left a tip, and set to wiping up the tables after them. A trucker came in and asked for coffee. She gave it to him, hardly noticing what she was doing. A scruffy kid came in and asked for worms. Not bothering to hide the disgust on her face she went over to the worm refrigerator and took out a styrofoam tub containing dirt and fifteen guaranteed-fat worms. He and the trucker both left. She was alone again. Absentmindedly, she took up the dishcloth and began wiping the counter…

Stephanie pressed herself against the wall, straining against the ropes that tied her fast. The tunnel was pitch dark, but already she could feel the vibrations of the approaching train, hear its lonesome, wailing whistle. But, strain as she might, she knew that it was hopeless. There wasn't enough clearance between the wall and the train for a living, breathing body! Frantically, she twisted her hands, feeling the coarse rope cut into her flesh. She reached down to her shoulder and grabbed the rope that bound her there between her teeth. She ground her jaws together desperately…

"I've got a knife! Give me all the money in the cash register!"

Kate hadn't even heard the door open. She looked up incredulously. A thin, sick-looking boy was leaning on the counter, staring at her. A knife? He had a knife? It suddenly occurred to her that Stephanie had never been threatened with a knife. The time might come when she would be, and Kate didn't know anything about knives.

"What kind of knife?" she asked.

"What do you mean, 'What kind of knife?'" the boy echoed. "A big knife! With a very long, sharp blade! And I'm going to cut you with it if you don't give me all the money in that cash register right now!"

With a shock, Kate realized that he meant it. Then she took a closer look at him.

He doesn't look any older than I am, she thought. And he looks scared silly. I'll bet he doesn't have a knife. No way does he have a knife.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what? Look – are you going to get that money, or am I going to have to cut you?" He still didn't make any move towards any knife.

"Why do you want the money?"

"Why?" he echoed again. "Because I'm starving, that's why. I haven't eaten in two days."

"Well, that's not very smart," Kate said, throwing the dishcloth back into the sink. The boy's mouth dropped open and he stared at her. "What I mean is … If you're really starving and you steal money from here that's not going to help you much. Like, you're hardly going to steal the money here, then order a sandwich or something and pay me for it, are you?"

The boy didn't seem able to answer.

"I mean. If you steal the money here, you're going to have to light out fast, right? Then I'll call the police. Then as far as I can see it, they'll either catch up with you and drag you into the police station – and you can be sure they won't feed you there – or if you do get away you'll have to hitchhike or something and get as far away from here as you can, as fast as you can. Either way, you're not going to get anything to eat, and you're still going to be hungry." As she spoke, Kate turned to the back counter and began slapping margarine onto slices of bread.

"What… What are you doing?"

"Making you a sandwich, turkey. You said you were starving, didn't you?" She tossed the sandwich onto a plate and pushed it over to him.

The boy stared at her.

"Go ahead. Eat it. It's not made of worms or anything." Kate stared back at him belligerently. "It's ham. Worms are for fish. Ham is for people."

The boy hesitated for a moment. He was standing, poised, as if ready for flight or attack but even he didn't know which. Then, as if of its own accord, his hand reached for the sandwich. Within seconds he was wolfing it down desperately.

"You weren't kidding about being hungry, were you?" Kate asked. She started to make another sandwich. Cheese this time. She set this in front of him, then filled up a mug with milk.

The boy didn't say a word, just sat down and gulped the food so fast he didn't seem to be chewing at all. Kate cut off a large slice of apple pie and slid that in front of him as well.

When he finished, the boy pushed himself back from the counter and looked up at Kate with slightly glazed eyes.

"You work here all the time?" he asked.

"My parents own the place," she answered shortly.

"They let you give away food like this?"

"No."

Times were even harder than usual lately, and Kate knew that her mother had every bit of food countered and measured. She'd answer for this.

"Who'll pay, then?" the boy asked.

"I will." She gathered up his dishes and almost threw them in the sink.

"But… How…?"

"It's okay. I've got money. I work Saturdays at the mall."

The boy stared at her in silence. Kate was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Have you ever done anything like this before?" she asked finally, gesturing toward the cash register. "I mean, you know, tried to hold up a place?"

"No." He sounded sheepish.

"Just as well. You're not very good at it."

"I guess not."

There was another awkward silence.

"What were you planning on doing? After you got the food?" Kate concentrated hard on scrubbing the already clean glass and plates.

"Hitching a ride west. I'm gonna try and find a job out there."

"I don't think you will," Kate said. "My brother Jesse has a friend went out a few months ago – he couldn't get a job anyhow and had to hitch his way back. He got home a week ago, tired, broke, and sick as a dog."

"Well," the boy protested angrily. "What else is there? What am I supposed to do?"

Kate abandoned the dishes. "You know anything about boats?" she asked.

"Boats! I should think so. Been brought up around the stinkin' things all my life. Don't know nothin' but boats!"

"And motors?"

"Sure. If you know boats, you know motors."

"Seems to me," Kate went on, "that a person who doesn't know anything but boats shouldn't be heading out west to the Prairies, of all places."

The boy started to answer, but she interrupted him. "Old Jed, up in town, he's starting to get his boats all ready for the tourist season and he was in here just the other day, saying he needs someone to help him. His place is right on Main Street, just by the river. There's a big sign there: 'Jed's Boats for Hire.' You couldn't miss it." She picked up the dishcloth out of the sink and started to wipe the counter with it furiously. "We need worms, too. The guy who supplies us left town last week. You know how to pick worms?"

"Sure. Who doesn't?"

Who doesn't, indeed, Kate thought, her nose wrinkling automatically.

"Anyway," she went on, "there's work around here if you want it, I guess." She wiped her way down to the other end of the counter, her back to him.

"What about… About what I said when I came in…"

"Oh, that." Kate turned to face him. "Forget it. I didn't believe you anyway."

"I *could* work then. At least until I got enough to pay you back…"

Kate shrugged again. "Seems to me you might just as well," she said.

"Yeah. I guess I might."

He pulled himself off the stool and headed for the door, then stopped to stare back at her for a moment. There was a strange, unreadable look on his face, but all he said was, "Thanks." At the entrance he paused, took something out of his pocket, and threw it in the trash barrel.

Kate took a step backwards and felt for a chair. Her legs suddenly felt as if they were made of melting lead. She sank onto the chair as the door slammed shut. She'd only had a glimpse of the object as the boy had tossed it into the garbage, but that was enough.

He *had* had a knife!

For a moment she felt sick at the thought of what could have happened, then like an old familiar car clicking slowly into gear, her mind began working again…

Stephanie looked up, startled, as the snack bar door burst open. There, in front of her, stood a disheveled, disreputable, totally terrifying figure. He swayed slightly, as if weak from disease or hunger, as he walked menacingly towards her, but she only had eyes for the gleaming, evil-looking, long-bladed knife that he carried in his right hand. It was pointing straight at her heart…

Bradford, Karleen. "Coffee, Snacks, Worms." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 87-92. Print.

Thank You Ma'am

-Langston Huges

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"Lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hmm! Your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody at home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman, starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with *me*," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose –at last. Roger looked at the door – looked at the woman – looked at the door – *and went to the sink.*

"Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat, and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry – or been hungry – to try to snatch my pocketbook."

"I want a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"Ma'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face, and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After a while she said," I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but,* didn't you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks.* Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son – neither tell God, if He didn't

already know. Everybody's got something in common. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"I don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, redheads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating, she got up and said, "Now here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else's* – because shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Good night! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than "Thank you, ma'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.

Hughes, Langston. "Thank You Ma'am." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 72-75. Print.

G. Trueheart, Man's Best Friend

-James McNamee

Tom Hamilton liked his Aunt Prudence. She taught at the university. Tom's father said she was all brains. Her name was Doctor Prudence Hamilton. When she came to Tom's father's farm in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, she always brought presents. Tom liked her.

He didn't like her constant companion, Genevieve Trueheart, a dog.

Tom Hamilton was fond of other dogs. He had a dog, a bull terrier called Rusty, a fighter right from the word go. Rusty kept the pheasants out of the garden and the young grain. He worked for a living. Tom couldn't like Genevieve Trueheart. She was good for nothing. She never even looked like a dog. She was a great big soft wheezing lady wagging monster, a great big useless lump.

Genevieve had been born a Golden Retriever of decent parents and Aunt Prudence had papers to prove it. But Genevieve had eaten so many chocolates and French pastries and frosted cakes that she was three times as wide as a Golden Retriever ought to be. She had the soft muscles of a jellyfish. She couldn't run. She couldn't walk. All she could do was waddle. She was a horrible example of what ten years of living with Aunt Prudence would do to any creature. She looked like a pigmy hippopotamus with hair.

Genevieve Trueheart gave Tom Hamilton a hard time. She followed him. She went wherever he went. She was starved for boys. She never had a chance to meet any in the city. Tom couldn't bend over to tie a boot but her big pink tongue would lick his face. She loved him.

At half past eight when he finished breakfast and started for school, there on the porch would be Genevieve Trueheart waiting for him.

She wants to go to school with you, Tommy, Aunt Prudence always said.

I think she'd better stay home, Tom always said. It's almost two kilometres. That's too far for her.

Take poor Genevieve, Tommy, Aunt Prudence and his mother always said. You know how she likes being with you.

Tom could have said, Why should I take her? When I take her the kids at school laugh at me. They ask, Why don't you send her back to the zoo and get a dog. But he didn't say that. It would have hurt Aunt Prudence's feelings.

On this morning he thought of something else to say. He said, A friend of mine saw a bear on the road. She had two cubs. We'd better leave Genevieve at home. I'll take Rusty.

Rusty has to stay to chase pheasants, his mother said.

What if I meet a cougar? Tom said. A fat dog like Genevieve would be a fine meal for a cougar.

Tommy, stop talking, his mother said.

A cougar can pick up a sheep and jump over a fence, Tommy said.

Tom Hamilton, his mother said, get to school!

So Tom Hamilton went down the woodland road with Genevieve Trueheart panting and puffing and snorting behind him. Twice he had to stop while Genevieve sat down and rested. He told her, Rusty doesn't think you're a dog. He thinks you're a big fat balloon that's got a tail and four legs. Tom said, Genevieve, I hope a car comes on the wrong side of the road and gets you, you big fat slob. He never meant it. He said I hope we meet those bears. He was just talking. He said, Do you know what I'm going to do at lunchtime, Genevieve? I'm going to give the fried pork liver that I have for you to another dog, to any dog who looks like a dog and not like a stuffed mattress, and your chocolate, Genevieve, I'll eat it myself. This was a lie. Tom Hamilton was honest.

Every kid who went to that school came with a dog. Yellow dogs. Brown dogs. Black dogs. White dogs. Black and white dogs. Black, white, and yellow dogs. Black, white, yellow, and brown dogs. They were a happy collection of dogs, and had long agreed among themselves who could beat whom, who could run faster than whom, who had the most fleas. From nine o'clock in the morning until noon they scratched. From noon until one they looked after their owners. From one o'clock until school was out at three they scratched.

These dogs did not welcome Genevieve. They were not jealous because she was a Golden Retriever and had papers to prove it; they couldn't believe an animal with a shape like Genevieve was a dog. A Mexican hairless dog, one of those small dogs you can slip into your pocket, put his nose against Genevieve's nose, and what did she do, she rolled over on her back with her feet in the air. After that, there wasn't a dog who would have anything to do with Genevieve Trueheart.

The kids asked Tom, What's she good for?

Tom knew the answer but he never told them. She was good for nothing.

Boy! She's a ball of grease, the kids said.

She's a city dog, Tom said.

Why don't you leave her at home? the kids said.

Because my aunt gives me a dollar a week to walk her to school, Tom said. A lie.

Boy, oh, boy! a kid said, I wouldn't be seen with her for two dollars a week.

After school, Tom waited until all the others had left. He couldn't stand any more unkind words. He took his time going home. He had to. If he hurried, Genevieve would sit down and yelp. They came to the woodland road. It was like a tunnel. The tall trees, the Douglas firs, the cedars, and the hemlocks, all stretched branches over Tom's head. The air seemed cold even in summer. Owls liked the woodland road, and so did tree frogs, and

deer liked it when flies were after them, but Tom didn't like it so much. He was always glad to get out of it and into the sunshine. Often when he walked along this road he had a feeling things were looking at him. He didn't mind Genevieve too much here. She was company.

This day, Tom knew that something was looking at him. He had the feeling. And there it was!

There it was, all two and a half metres of it, a Vancouver Island panther! Its tail was twitching. Its eyes burned green, burned yellow, burned bright. Its ears were flat against its head.

Tom's feet stopped. His blood and all his other juices tinkled into ice, and for a moment the whole world seemed to disappear behind a white wall. A heavy animal brushed against him, and at the shock of that, Tom could see again. It was Genevieve. She had sat down and, to rest herself, was leaning on his leg.

The cougar's ears were still flat, its eyes burning as if lighted candles were in them. it was still crouched on the rock, still ready to spring.

Tom heard a thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, and he thought it was the sound of his heart, but it wasn't. It was Genevieve beating her tail against the gravel to show how happy she was to be sitting doing nothing. That made Tom mad. If she had been any kind of dog she would have known about the cougar before Tom did. She should have smelled him. She should have been just out of reach of his claws and barking. She should have been giving Tom a chance to run away. That's what Rusty would have done. But no, not Genevieve; all she could do was bump her fat tail and look happy.

The cougar came closer. A centimetre at a time, still in a crouch, he had slid down on the rock. Tom could see the movement in his legs. He was like a cat after a robin.

Tom felt sick, and cold, but his brain was working. I can't run, he thought, if I run he'll be on me. He'll rip Genevieve with one paw and me with the other. Tom thought, too, that if he had a match he could rip pages out of his school books and set them on fire for he knew that cougars and tigers and leopards and lions were afraid of anything burning. He had no match because supposing his father had ever caught him with matches in his pocket during the dry season, then wow and wow and wow! Maybe, he thought, if I had a big stone I could stun him. He looked. There were sharp, flat pieces of granite at the side of the road where somebody had blasted.

The cougar jumped. It was in the air like a huge yellow bird. Tom had no trouble leaving. He ran to the side of the road and picked up a piece of granite.

Of course, when he moved, Genevieve Trueheart, who had been leaning against his leg, fell over. She hadn't seen anything. She lay there. She was happy. She looked like a sack of potatoes.

The cougar walked around Genevieve twice as if he didn't believe it. He couldn't tell what she was. He paid no attention to Tom Hamilton. He had seen men before. He had never seen anything like Genevieve. He stretched his neck out and sniffed. She must have smelled pretty good because he sat down beside her and licked one of his paws. He was getting ready for dinner. He was thinking, Boy, oh, boy! this is a picnic.

Tom Hamilton could have run away, but he never. He picked up one of those sharp pieces of granite.

The cougar touched Genevieve with the paw he had been licking, friendly-like, just to know how soft the meat was. Genevieve stopped wagging her tail. She must have thought that the cougar's claws didn't feel much like Tom Hamilton's fingers. She lifted her head and looked behind her. There can be no doubt that she was surprised.

Tom was ashamed of her. Get up and fight! he yelled. Any other dog would fight. Rusty would have put his nips in before the cougar got finished with the job. But not Genevieve. She rolled over onto her back and put her four fat feet in the air. She made noises that never had been heard. She didn't use any of her old noises.

The cougar was disgusted with the fuss Genevieve was making. He snarled. His ears went back. Candles shone in his green-yellow eyes. He slapped Genevieve between his paws like a ball.

Tom saw smears of blood on the road and pieces of Genevieve's hide in the cougar's claws. He still had a chance to run away. He never. He threw the piece of granite. He hit the cougar in its middle. The cougar turned, eyes green, eyes yellow.

How long the cougar looked at Tom, Tom will never know.

The sweet smell of Genevieve's chocolate-flavoured blood was too much for the cougar. He batted her about like a ball again. Tom picked up another piece of granite that weighed almost five kilograms, and bang! he hit the cougar right in the face.

The cougar fell on top of Genevieve. The cougar stood up and shook its head. Then it walked backwards like a drunken sailor.

And at that moment a bus full of lumberjacks who were going into town rounded the curve. The tires screeched as the driver stopped it, and thirty big lumberjacks got out yelling – well, you've never heard such yelling, and the cougar quit walking backwards and jumped out of sight between two cedars.

What did Genevieve Trueheart do? That crazy dog waggled on her stomach down the road in the same direction the cougar had gone. She was so scared she didn't know what she was doing.

Boy, oh, boy! that's some dog, the lumberjacks said. She just won't quit. She's a fighter.

Yah! Tom said.

She's bleeding, the lumberjacks said. She saved your life. We'd better get her to a doctor.

They put Genevieve Trueheart and Tom Hamilton in the bus.

Boy, oh, boy! the lumberjacks said, a fighting dog like that is man's best friend.

Yah! Tom said.

The bus went right into Tommy's yard and thirty lumberjacks told Tommy's mother and father and Aunt Prudence how Genevieve Trueheart, man's best friend, had saved Tommy.

Yah! said Tom.

Then Aunt Prudence put an old blanket and old newspapers over the back seat of her car so the blood wouldn't drop into the fabric when she was taking Genevieve Trueheart to the horse, cow, and dog doctor.

Aunt Prudence said, Now you know how much she loves you, Tommy. She saved your life.

Yah! Tommy said.

McNamee, James. "G. Trueheart, Man's Best Friend." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 94-99. Print.

On The Sidewalk Bleeding

-Evan Hunter

The boy lay on the sidewalk bleeding in the rain. He was sixteen years old, and he wore a bright purple jacket, and the lettering across the back of the jacket read THE ROYALS. The boy's name was Andy and the name was delicately scripted in black thread on the front of the jacket, just over the heart. *Andy.*

He had been stabbed ten minutes ago. The knife entered just below his rib cage and had been drawn across his body violently, tearing a wide gap in his flesh. He lay on the sidewalk with the March rain drilling his jacket and drilling his body and washing away the blood that poured from his open wound. He had known excruciating pain when the knife had torn across his body, and then sudden comparative relief when the blade was pulled away. He had heard the voice saying, 'That's for you Royal! " and then the sound of footsteps hurrying into the rain, and then he had fallen to the sidewalk, clutching his stomach, trying to stop the flow of blood.

He tried to yell for help, but he had no voice. He did not know why his voice had deserted him, or why there was an open hole in his body from which his life ran readily, steadily, or why the rain had become so suddenly fierce. It was 11:13 p.m. but he did not know the time.

There was another thing he did not know.

He did not know he was dying. He lay on the sidewalk, bleeding, and he thought only: *That was a fierce rumble*. *They got me good that time,* but he did not know he was dying. He would have been frightened had he known. In his ignorance he lay bleeding and wishing he could cry out for help, but there was no voice in his throat. There was only the bubbling of blood from between his lips whenever he opened his mouth to speak. He lay in his pain, waiting, waiting for someone to find him.

He could hear the sound of automobile tires hushed on the rain swept streets, far away at the other end of the long alley. He lay with his face pressed to the sidewalk, and he could see the splash of neon far away at the other end of the alley, tinting the pavement red and green, slickly brilliant in the rain.

He wondered if Laura would be angry.

He had left the dance to get a package of cigarettes. He had told her he would be back in a few minutes, and then he had gone downstairs and found the candy store closed. He knew that Alfredo's on the next block would be open. He had started through the alley, and that was when he had been ambushed. He could hear the faint sound of music now, coming from a long, long way off. He wondered if Laura was dancing, wondered if she had missed him yet. Maybe she thought he wasn't coming back. Maybe she thought he'd cut out for good. Maybe she had already left the dance and gone home. He thought of her face, the brown eyes and the jet-black hair,

and thinking of her he forgot his pain a little, forgot that blood was rushing from his body. Someday he would marry Laura. Someday he would marry her, and they would have a lot of kids, and then they would get out of the neighborhood. They would move to a clean project in the Bronx, or maybe they would move to Staten Island. When they were married, when they had kids…

He heard footsteps at the other end of the alley, and he lifted his cheek from the sidewalk and looked into the darkness and tried to cry out, but again there was only a soft hissing bubble of blood on his mouth.

The man came down the alley. He had not seen Andy yet. He walked, and then stopped to lean against the brick of the building, and then walked again. He saw Andy then and came toward him, and he stood over him for a long time, the minutes ticking, ticking, watching him and not speaking.

Then he said, "What's the matter, buddy'?"

Andy could not speak, and he could barely move. He lifted his face slightly and looked up at the man, and in the rain swept alley he smelled the sickening odor of alcohol and realized the man was drunk. He did not feel any particular panic. He did not know he was dying, and so he felt only mild disappointment that the man who had found him was drunk.

The man was smiling.

"Did you fall down, buddy?" he asked.

"You must be as drunk as I am." He grinned, seemed to remember why he had entered the alley in the first place, and said, "Don't go way. I'll be ri' back."

The man lurched away. Andy heard his footsteps, and then the sound of the man colliding with a garbage can, and some mild swearing, lost in the steady wash of the rain. He waited for the man to come back.

It was 11:39.

When the man returned, he squatted alongside Andy. He studied him with drunken dignity.

"You gonna catch cold there," he said. "What's the matter? You like layin' in the wet?"

Andy could not answer. The man tried to focus his eyes on Andy's face. The rain spattered around them.

"You like a drink?"

Andy shook his head.

"I gotta bottle. Here," the man said. He pulled a pint bottle from his inside jacket pocket. He uncapped it and extended it to Andy. Andy tried to move, but pain wrenched him back flat against the sidewalk.

"Take it," the man said. He kept watching Andy. "Take it." When Andy did not move, he said, "Nev' mind, I'll have one m'self." He tilted the bottle to his lips and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "You too young to be drinkin' anyway. Should be 'shamed of yourself, drunk an' layin' in a alley, all wet. Shame on you. I gotta good mind to calla cop."

Andy nodded. Yes, he tried to say. Yes, call a cop. Please call one.

"Oh, you don' like that, huh?" the drunk said. "You don' wanna cop to fin' you all drunk an' wet in an alley, huh? Okay, buddy. This time you get off easy." He got to his feet. "This time you lucky." He waved broadly at Andy, and then almost lost his footing. "S'long, buddy," he said.

Wait, Andy thought. *Wait, please, I'm bleeding.*

"S'long," the drunk said again, "I see you aroun'," and the he staggered off up the alley.

Andy lay and thought: *Laura, Laura. Are you dancing?*

The couple came into the alley suddenly. They ran into the alley together, running from the rain, the boy holding the girl's elbow, the girl spreading a newspaper over her head to protect her hair. Andy watched them run into the alley laughing, and then duck into the doorway not ten feet from him.

"Man, what rain!" the boy said. "You could drown out there."

"I have to get home," the girl said. "It's late, Freddie. I have to get home."

"We got time," Freddie said. "Your people won't raise a fuss if you're a little late. Not with this with kind of weather."

"It's dark," the girl said, and she giggled.

"Yeah," the boy answered, his voice very low.

"Freddie …?"

"Um?"

"You're ... standing very close to me."

"Um."

There was a long silence. Then the girl said, "Oh," only that single word, and Andy knew she had been kissed, and he suddenly hungered for Laura's mouth. It was then that he wondered if he would ever kiss Laura again. It was then that he wondered if he was dying.

No, he thought, *I can't be dying, not from a little street rumble, not from just getting cut. Guys get cut all the time in rumbles. I can't be dying. No, that's stupid. That don't make any sense at all.*

"You shouldn't," the girl said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"I love you, Angela," the boy said.

"I love you, too, Freddie," the girl said, and Andy listened and thought: *I love you, Laura. Laura, I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, this is stupid but I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, I think I'm dying!*

He tried to speak. He tried to move. He tried to crawl toward the doorway where he could see the two figures in embrace. He tried to make a noise, a sound, and a grunt came from his lips, and then he tried again, and another grunt came, a low animal grunt of pain.

“What was that?” the girl said, suddenly alarmed, breaking away from the boy.

“I don't know,” he answered.

“Go look, Freddie.”

“No. Wait.”

Andy moved his lips again. Again the sound came from him.

“Freddie!"

“What?”

“I'm scared.”

“I'll go see,” the boy said.

He stepped into the alley. He walked over to where Andy lay on the ground. He stood over him, watching him.

“You all right?” he asked.

“What is it?” Angela said from the doorway.

“Somebody's hurt,” Freddie said.

“Let's get out of here,” Angela said.

“No. Wait a minute.” He knelt down beside Andy. “You cut?” he asked.

Andy nodded. The boy kept looking at him. He saw the lettering on the jacket then. THE ROYALS. He turned to Angela.

“He's a Royal,” he said.

“Let's … what … what do you want to do, Freddie?”

“I don't know. I don't want to get mixed up in this. He's a Royal. We help him, and the Guardians'll be down on our necks. I don't want to get mixed up in this, Angela.”

“Is he… is he hurt bad?”

“Yeah, it looks that way.”

“What shall we do?”

“I don't know.”

“We can't leave him here in the rain,” Angela hesitated. “Can we?”

“If we get a cop, the Guardians'll find out who,” Freddie said. “I don't know, Angela. I don't know.”

Angela hesitated a long time before answering. Then she said, “I want to go home, Freddie. My people will begin to worry.”

“Yeah,” Freddie said. He looked at Andy again. “You all right?” he asked. Andy lifted his face from the sidewalk, and his eyes said: *Please, please help me*, and maybe Freddie read what his eyes were saying, and maybe he didn't.

Behind him, Angela said, “Freddie, let's get out of here! Please!” Freddie stood up. He looked at Andy again, and then mumbled, “I'm sorry,” and then he took Angela's arm and together they ran towards the neon splash at the other end of the alley.

Why, they're afraid of the Guardians, Andy thought in amazement. *But why should they be? I wasn't afraid of the Guardians. I never turkeyed out of a rumble with the Guardians. I got heart. But I'm bleeding.*

The rain was soothing somehow. It was a cold rain, but his body was hot all over, and the rain helped cool him. He had always liked rain. He could remember sitting in Laura's house one time, the rain running down the windows, and just looking out over the street, watching the people running from the rain. That was when he'd first joined the Royals. He could remember how happy he was when the Royals had taken him. The Royals and the Guardians, two of the biggest. He was a Royal. There had been meaning to the title.

Now, in the alley, with the cold rain washing his hot body, he wondered about the meaning. If he died, he was Andy. He was not a Royal. He was simply Andy, and he was dead. And he wondered suddenly if the Guardians who had ambushed him and knifed him had ever once realized he was Andy. Had they known that he was Andy or had they simply known that he was Royal wearing a purple silk jacket? Had they stabbed him, Andy, or had they only stabbed the jacket and the title, and what good was the title if you were dying?

I'm Andy, he screamed wordlessly, *I'm Andy.*

An old lady stopped at the other end of the alley. The garbage cans were stacked there, beating noisily in the rain. The old lady carried an umbrella with broken ribs, carried it with all the dignity of a queen. She stepped into the mouth of the alley, shopping bag over one arm. She lifted the lids of the garbage cans delicately, and she did not hear Andy grunt because she was a little deaf and because the rain was beating a steady relentless tattoo on the cans. She had been searching and foraging for the better part of the night. She collected her string and her newspapers, and an old hat with a feather on it from one of the garbage cans, and a broken footstool from another of the cans. And then she replaced the lids and lifted her umbrella high and walked out of the alley mouth with queenly dignity. She had worked swiftly and soundlessly, and now she was gone.

The alley looked very long now. He could see people passing at the other end of it, and he wondered who the people were, and he wondered if he would ever get to know them, wondered who it was of the Guardians who had stabbed him, who had plunged the knife into his body.

“That's for you, Royal!” the voice had said, and then the footsteps, his arms being released by the others, the fall to the pavement. “That's for you, Royal!” Even in his pain, there had been some sort of pride in knowing he was a Royal. Now there was no pride at all. With the rain beginning to chill him, with the blood pouring steadily between his fingers, he knew only a sort of dizziness, and within the giddy dizziness, he could only think: *I want to be Andy.*

It was not very much to ask of the world.

He watched the world passing at the other end of the alley. The world didn't know he was Andy. The world didn't know he was alive. He wanted to

say, "Hey, I'm alive! Hey, look at me! I'm alive! Don't you know I'm alive? Don't you know I exist?"

He felt weak and very tired. He felt alone, and wet and feverish and chilled. He knew he was going to die now, and the knowledge made him suddenly sad. He was not frightened. For some reason, he was not frightened. He was only filled with an overwhelming sadness that his life would be over at sixteen. He felt all at once as if he had never done anything, never seen anything, never been anywhere. There were so many things to do, and he wondered why he'd never thought of them before, wondered why the rumbles and the dances and the purple jackets had always seemed so important to him before, and now they seemed like such small things in a world he was missing, a world that was rushing past at the other end of the alley.

I don't want to die, he thought*. I haven't lived yet.*

It seemed very important to him that he take off the purple jacket. He was very close to dying, and when they found him, he did not want them to say, “Oh, it's a Royal.” With great effort, he rolled over onto his back. He felt the pain tearing at his stomach when he moved, a pain he did not think was possible. But he wanted to take off the jacket. If he never did another thing, he wanted to take off the jacket. The jacket had only one meaning now, and that was a very simple meaning.

If he had not been wearing the jacket, he would not have been stabbed. The knife had not been plunged in hatred of Andy. The knife hated only the purple jacket. The jacket was as stupid meaningless thing that was robbing him of his life. He wanted the jacket off his back. With an enormous loathing, he wanted the jacket off his back.

He lay struggling with the shiny wet jacket. His arms were heavy. Pain ripped fire across his body whenever he moved. But he squirmed and fought and twisted until one arm was free and then the other, and then he rolled away from the jacket and lay quite still, breathing heavily, listening to the sound of his breathing and the sounds of the rain and thinking: *Rain is sweet, I'm Andy.*

She found him in the alleyway a minute past midnight. She left the dance to look for him, and when she found him, she knelt beside him and said, “Andy, it's me, Laura.”

He did not answer her. She backed away from him, tears springing into her eyes, and then she ran from the alley hysterically and did not stop running until she found a cop.

And now, standing with the cop, she looked down at him, and the cop rose and said, “He's dead,” and all the crying was out of her now. She stood in the rain and said nothing, looking at the dead boy on the pavement, and looking at the purple jacket that rested a foot away from his body.

The cop picked up the jacket and turned it over in his hands.

“A Royal, huh?” he said.

The rain seemed to beat more steadily now, more fiercely.

She looked at the cop and, very quietly, she said, "His name is Andy."

The cop slung the jacket over his arm. He took out his black pad, and he flipped it open to a blank page.

“A Royal,” he said.

Then he began writing.

Hunter, Evan. “On the Sidewalk Bleeding” *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 35-42. Print.

The Day the Martian Landed

-Pierre Berton

The flying saucer landed on Fred Foster's back lawn at three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. Fred's oldest daughter, Mona, answered the door. There was a little green man standing there; he had a bald head, bulbous eyes, huge ears, and a pair of antennae protruding from his forehead. He was wearing a goldfish bowl on his head. She recognized him at once as a Martian.

"Take me to your leader," said the newcomer politely.

"Hey, Pop!" Mona called. "There's a Martian at the back door wants to see you."

Fred Foster was sitting in his undershirt in the television room, watching the football on Channel Two. "Tell him we don't want any!" he called back. "Whatever it is, we got plenty!"

"He ain't selling nothing, Pop," Mona called back. "He's a *Martian.*"

Fred Foster got up wearily. "They'll do anything to get into the house," he said. "Last week they told me I'd won a free health course."

He glared at the Martian, who was still standing politely in the doorway.

"Okay," said Foster, "come out with it. What are you selling? And don't try to tell me you're taking a survey or something. We had that one."

"Take me to your leader," said the Martian politely, just has he'd been taught in rocket school.

"I think he's got something to do with Atomic Appliances," said Mrs. Foster, coming to the door and wiping her hands on her apron. "They've always got some gimmick or other."

But Fred Foster had been feeling the Martian, pulling at its ears and fiddling with its antennae. "By George," he said, "I believe the fellow *is* a Martian!"

"Of course," said Mona. "I'd know him anywhere."

"Well for heaven's sake, invite the man in," said Mrs. Foster. "I'll just make some nice iced tea."

So they asked the Martian into the sitting room and they all sat down and looked at him while Mrs. Foster got the iced tea ready.

The Martian refused the iced tea politely and also the chocolate chip cookies. But when the Persian cat jumped up on his lap, he ate that instead, fur and all. The Fosters were a bit put out, but didn't like to say anything since the Martian was company.

"Take me to your leader," the Martian said, looking around wistfully for another cat.

"By George, he's right," said Fred Foster. "This is one of those diplomatic things."

"Who *is* our leader?" Mona asked him.

Well now, that was a poser. Mrs. Foster insisted that it was the mayor, but Fred held out for the premier.

"Now, hold on, Fred," said Mrs. Foster. "If you're going to go to the top, then you have to go right to the secretary of state or maybe even to the prime minister."

"You've hit it, Mother!" said Fred Foster. "The prime minister, of course. This Martian comes from another country, don't he? Well, then he has to meet the head of a *country*. I'll just go and call up the prime minister now."

So he put in a long-distance call to Ottawa and made it person-to-person just in case the prime minister should be away on a trip or something. But he did not get him, only a young man whose name sounded like Grlb and who assured Fred Foster that he could speak for his chief.

"Well, all right," said Fred Foster. "Look, we've got a Martian here. He's landed in our backyard in one of those saucer things that they've been seeing around and he wants to go up to Ottawa and meet the prime minister personally."

The young man wasn't in the least surprised. He said that Mr. Foster would get a letter about it, and two days later the letter came:

> *The Prime Minster has asked me to tell you how very interested he was in your experience Saturday last and how much he appreciates your taking the trouble to call him personally regarding it.*
>
> *He has expressed the hope that should you ever be in Ottawa you will drop in to the visitor's gallery of the House of Commons and watch the democratic process of this great nation in action.*
>
> *Sincerely yours,*
> REGINALD GLRB
> *Assistant to the Prime Minister*

This didn't seem very satisfactory.

"Maybe we ought to call the newspapers," said Mrs. Foster. The Martian was becoming a bit of a nuisance. He lived most of the time in his flying saucer, but periodically he would appear at the door and plaintively say, "Take me to your leader."

So Fred Foster got on the phone to a huge metropolitan daily, which I will not name here so that no one can say I am biased. The newspaper reporter who answered was very interested in the flying-saucer story. Fred could hear him scribbling furiously.

"Come out and see for yourself," said Fred Foster, but the reporter said that wouldn't be necessary; they could get all the details by phone and thus catch the home edition.

That afternoon there was a hilarious story on the second front page about Fred Foster's Martian, illustrated by comic cartoons. The story was

immediately copied by the other two huge metropolitan papers, and the following day, sparing no expense, one of them actually sent a reporter to see the Fosters. The Fosters invited him into the sitting room, where he photographed all of them and took down some more quotes for his paper.

"The Martian's out back in his saucer," said Fred Foster. "Come on now and I'll show him to you."

But the reporter looked at his watch and said he really didn't have time, if he was going to catch the early edition and beat the other papers wit his pix. He said he had all he needed, anyway; they probably wouldn't use more than two folios of copy, or maybe even just captions under a three-column photo on page three. Which was the way it turned out.

> *"MARTIAN" SLEPT HERE, according to Mr. and Mrs. J. Forster (centre, left) of 224B Cecil St., and daughter Mona, fourteen (right), point to the spot on the couch where they claim visitor from Mars sat and drank iced tea.*

The following night the little Martian (who wasn't actually a Martian, but certainly an alien) took off in his flying saucer feeling a bit frustrated. He landed in a backyard in Poughkeepsie, New York, knocked on the door, and started all over again: "Take me to your leader," he said hopefully.

He had been doing it for six and a half years without getting anywhere. He was a very stubborn Martian.

Berton, Pierre. "The Day the Martian Landed." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 122-125. Print.

Bus Stop

-W. D. Valgardson

We were in the middle of algebra class when the siren started. One moment, we were pondering the mysteries of mathematics and the next we were listening to the siren rise and fall and looking out the window. Beyond the houses and the bare limbs of the maples, there was the lake. We couldn't see it, but we knew it by heart, the curve of frozen sand, the kilometers of ice. It was a dull day with solid cloud cover. White ice, white clouds with a narrow band of daylight between.

You could see everyone listening. Even the teacher had stopped in place, his chalk held between thumb and first two fingers. There aren't many sirens in a small town. At first I thought it was the firetruck, then I realized it was too far away and the sound was too big. Then everyone's eyes swung toward a column of smoke that rose out over the lake and then there was the roar of a low flying T-33.

There were more sirens now. Smaller ones. Coming toward town. Half a dozen kids in the class were from the air base. Their fathers trained new pilots. One of the kids began to cry.

The sirens got real close, then went past, faded and stopped. At lunch time, we heard that the rescue truck got stuck in a snowdrift. A couple of locals took a tractor but they were in a hurry and the front end dropped into a crack. All this time, the second jet was circling, passing over the school low enough to make our desks tremble. A local pilot flew over and saw a body beside the hole in the ice where the plane went through. When he tried to land, he crashed but he wasn't hurt.

***

Yesterday, standing at a bus stop in Victoria, I started talking to an elderly lady. She asked me where I was from and I said Gimli and she said yes, she knew where that was, her son had been killed there while training as a pilot, he was practicing flying without instruments and got disoriented by the snowy lake and the clouds and dove straight into the ice, only nineteen and they'd missed him terribly, but she doubted if after all this time I'd remember it. I was, I said to her without thinking, sitting in the third seat in the row closest to the window and I was doing algebraic equations when it happened.

Valgardson, W.D. "Bus Stop." *Crossroads 9.* Scarborough, Ont.: Gage Educational Pub., 1999. 102-103. Print.

R We D8ting?

-Sandra Barron

The orange message light on my cellphone started blinking as I was getting ready for bed. Barely an hour had passed since our quick kiss goodnight at the subway, and I was surprised to see the screen light up with the initials I'd just entered into my phone. It wasn't voice mail; it was a text message, and it made me smile.

U miss me? ;-)

I'd met him a week before at my usual Wednesday night hangout. He was alone but gregarious, and he seemed to be pals with the female bartender -- a tacit vote of confidence. He chatted with my friends and me and then left with a wave from the door, and when my friend Kate and I ordered our next drinks, the bartender said this round was on the guy we'd been talking to.

Surprised, we debated his motivations. I insisted that perfectly normal people sometimes buy strangers drinks just to be nice. Kate thought he was way too aggressive.

When I saw him at the bar the next Wednesday, I thanked him for the drink. He asked if he could take me to dinner sometime; I said I'd think about it. He walked me to the subway and we exchanged numbers, but I thought it would be days before I heard from him, if ever, making this late-night text message all the more unexpected.

I like text messages. They fill an ever-narrowing gap in modern communication tools, combining the immediacy of a phone call with the convenience of an answering machine message and the premeditation of e-mail. And if they happen to be from a crush and pop up late at night, they have the giddy re-readability of a note left on a pillow.

So did I miss him? Certainly not yet. But I was flying from New York to West Virginia in the morning for work; maybe I'd miss him while I was away? I could already hear my friends citing his enthusiasm as evidence he was coming on too strong, but I'd had enough of aloof. I found his boldness refreshing.

Before I turned out the light and snapped the phone into its charger, I allowed myself one more grin at his message and a grimace at his middle-school style ("U"? A winking smiley face?). Then I deleted it.

He called the next afternoon while I was grounded in Pittsburgh between flights. He kept me company while I ambled down moving walkways and wandered through a loop of food courts. We talked about work for the first time; he said he worked intense hours as a freelancer so he could take months off at a time to travel, and he showed he had been paying attention by asking me about things we had discussed at the bar. He asked if we could have dinner when I got back to town, and I said sure.

A few hours later, as the prop plane taxied toward the gate in West Virginia, I turned on my phone and an animated lighthouse beacon indicated that it was searching for a signal. For three days, the light swept the dark cartoon sea in vain. Every time I saw "no signal" on the screen I felt unmoored and isolated. But as soon as the signal bars sprang to life on my trip home on Monday, that orange light flashed on and, sure enough, it was him.

Miss me now?

I'd missed having cellphone service, and my mind had indeed wandered at times to our airport conversation. But that degree of nuance was too much for the 12-button keypad, so I wrote, Hi! Sure. Talk when I get back.

This set off a volley of texts. Where did I live? What day is good? What about tonight? Tomorrow? We decided on dinner that Thursday and I finally signed off, thumb sore and eyes tired.

At the office on Tuesday, as the light blinked on again (Din in SoHo then drinks in the E Vil, and maybe a kiss), I wondered, Just who is this guy?

Google failed me. One time, armed with only a guy's first name and the fact that he sold sneakers, I had found his full details and photos online. But all I had here was a cellphone number and initials, and Friendster, MySpace and Technorati -- the entire digital detective squad of the modern dater -- were stumped.

I would actually have to learn about him the old-fashioned way, in person. Which is partly why, on a slushy, windy Wednesday afternoon, I liked his next message:

Dinner @ Raoul's 2morrow, I just made reservations 4 7:30.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone out with someone who'd made reservations.

Sounds good! I replied.

A message came back as I was leaving the office: *Its better than good -- u r with me! Maybe I'll stop by the bar 2nite.*

So he remembered I usually went on Wednesdays.

On the way over, feet soaked and fingers numb, I knew that I didn't want him to brave the sleet just to see me, especially since it would be awkward trying to get to know him better while hanging out with people he had never met. And after all, we had reservations for the next night.

Don't come out in this weather! I wrote. *Can't really hang out anyway, see you tomorrow.*

His reply was impossibly swift for its length: *I live 45 seconds from there and I would be doing my own thing. I am not leachy. Very independent boy I am. I may or may not, depends where the wind takes me.*

Was it just me, or had things just taken a hairpin turn for the hostile? My message was meant to be friendly. Had it come out that way? Or was I

reading him wrong? I needed to find a way to respond that was light, in case I was only imagining he was angry, but not flippant, in case he actually was.

I swallowed my distaste for cutesy abbreviations and tried: *LOL! As you like, then. :-)* I cringed slightly as I hit send; this suddenly seemed like a dangerously clumsy way of communicating.

Minutes later: *Would u like me 2 stay away?*

Oh, dear. At this point, yes. Wires were crossing that would probably be best untangled in person, the next day.

Entering the bar, I waved to my friends in their booth and, before joining them, whipped off a quick response, attempting to be polite and clear: *Yeah, I guess that'd be better; you'd distract me if you were here.*

A minute later, after I'd settled in with my friends, the orange light looked like a warning: *2 late, im here.*

I looked up. Sure enough, there he was, talking to two girls at the bar. He drifted closer and hovered nearby but didn't make eye contact. By the time he came over and sat down, a full hour had passed.

He'd clearly had a few drinks, and our conversation went downhill as fast as it had on our phone screens. He said that I'd tried to "control" him by saying he shouldn't come to the bar and added that he hadn't come to see me but to see other people. After going on in this vein for a while, he suddenly softened and asked me to "promise one thing": a kiss before the night was over.

I stammered that I couldn't make any promises. He shook his head and stormed off, sloshing the beers on the table and sending a pool cue clattering to the floor.

Before I could process what had happened, he looked over from his perch on a nearby barstool and smiled, winked and waved over his shoulder as if we'd never met. My friends, wide-eyed, asked what was going on. I wasn't sure, but I did know one thing: reservations or not, tomorrow's date was off.

Not so that evil blinking light. Only half an hour later, with both of us still in the bar, no, was it possible? Another message?

What was that all about? He'd written: *R we still on 4 2morrow?*

I deleted the message and put my phone away, hoping to erase the whole encounter. Soon he seemed to have left, and as long as my phone stayed in the dark recesses of my purse, I believed that he was powerless to bother me.

But suddenly there he was again, standing a few feet from our booth, smiling and crooking his finger at me.

I shook my head.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

I told him we had nothing to talk about.

Turns out I wasn't the only person who found him menacing; within minutes the bartender took the stocky wine glass out of his hand and told him to leave.

I hoped he would be so embarrassed that he wouldn't dream of contacting me again. But the next morning the blinking orange light seemed louder than my bleating alarm clock. Three new messages. Mailbox full.

From 6:30 a.m.: *I am done boozing for a while!! ;-)*

From 6:38 a.m.: *What did I do 2 upset u? Do u not want to have dinner?*

At 6:45, as if he had waited long enough for a reply: *Anyway, 2 bad, I would have liked 2 have gotten 2 know u.*

I liked the finality of that one.

But had he really given up, or was there simply no more room in the inbox? I deleted those three and got on the subway. I emerged to find: *Pls forgive me and join me 4 dinner. ;-(*

We are not going out, I wrote.

What did I do?

I'm at work and we're not discussing this.

Whatever, he wrote. *U don't have 2 b ignorant. Peace.*

I turned off the phone, dumbfounded. How had this happened? How had we managed to speed through all the stages of an actual relationship almost solely via text message? I'd gone from butterflies to doubt to anger at his name on the screen, before we even knew each other.

That was it, I decided: no more text-message flirtations for me. From now on I'd stick to more old-fashioned ways of getting to know a guy. Like e-mail.

Barron, Sandra. "R We D8ting?" *The New York Times.* N.p., 24 July 2005. Web. 22 July 2015.

On the Bridge

By Todd Strasser

"I beat up this guy at the mall yesterday," Adam Lockwood said. He was leaning on the stone wall of the bridge, smoking a cigarette and watching the cars speed by on the highway beneath him. His black hair fell down into his eyes.

"How come?" Seth Dawson asked, leaning on the stone wall next to him.

Adam shrugged. The turned-up collar of his leather jacket rose and fell along his neck. "He just bugged me, that's all. He was bigger, probably a senior. I guess he thought he could take me 'cause I was smaller. But I don't let anyone push me around."

"What'd you do to him?" Seth asked. He too was smoking a cigarette. It was his first ever, and he wasn't really inhaling. Just holding the smoke in his mouth for a while and then blowing it out.

"I'm pretty sure I broke his nose," Adam said. "I couldn't hang around to find out because the guy in the pizza place called the cops. I'm already in enough trouble with them."

"What for?" Seth asked. He noticed that when Adam took a drag, he seemed to hold the smoke in his mouth and then blow it out his nose. But it was probably just a different way of inhaling. Adam definitely inhaled.

"They just don't like me," Adam said. "You know how it is."

Seth nodded. Actually, he didn't know how it was. But there was no way he'd admit that. It was just pretty cool to think that the cops didn't like you. Seth was pretty sure the cops didn't even know who he was.

The two boys looked back down at the highway. It was a warm spring afternoon, and instead of taking the bus home after school, they'd decided to walk to the diner. There Adam had instructed Seth on how to feed quarters into the cigarette machine and get a pack of Marlboros. Seth had been really nervous about getting caught, but Adam told him it was no sweat. If the owner came out, you'd just tell him you were picking them up for your mother.

Now the pack of Marlboros was sticking out of the breast pocket of Seth's new denim jacket. It wasn't supposed to look new because he'd ripped the sleeves off and had washed it in the washing machine a hundred times to make it look old and worn. But somehow it had come out looking new and worn. Seth had decided to wear it anyway, but he felt like a fraud. Like a kid trying to imitate someone truly cool. On the other hand, Adam's leather jacket looked authentically old and worn. The right sleeve was ripped and the leather was creased and pliant. It looked like he'd been in a hundred fights with it. Seth had never been in a fight in his life. Not a serious punching fight, at least.

The other thing about Adam was, he wore the leather jacket to school every day. Adam wasn't one of those kids who kept their cool clothes in their lockers and only wore them in school because their parents wouldn't let them wear them at home. Seth had parents like that. His mother would have had a fit if she ever saw him wearing his sleeveless denim jacket, so he had to hide it in the garage every day before he went into the house. Then in the morning when he left for school he'd go through the garage and pick it up.

Seth leaned forward and felt the smooth cold granite of the bridge with his fingers. The bridge was old and made of large granite blocks. Its heavy stone abutments stood close to the cars that sped past on the highway beneath it. Newer bridges were made of steel. Their spans were longer and the abutments were farther from the road.

On the highway, a red Fiat convertible approached with two girls riding in the front seat. Adam waved, and one of the girls waved back. A second later the car shot under the bridge and disappeared. He turned to Seth and grinned. "Maybe they'll get off on the exit ramp and come back," he said.

"You think?" Seth asked. Actually, the thought made him nervous. "They must be old enough at least to drive."

"So?" Adam asked. "I go out with older girls all the time."

"Really?" Seth asked.

"Sure," Adam said. He took another drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke out of his nose. Seth wanted to try that, but he was afraid he'd start to cough or do something else equally uncool.

In the distance a big semitrailer appeared on the high way. Adam raised his arm in the air and pumped his fist up and down. The driver responded with three loud blasts of his air horns. A moment later the semi rumbled under them and disappeared.

"Let me try that," Seth said. Another truck was coming and he leaned over the stone ledge and jerked his arm up and down. But the trucker ignored him.

Adam laughed.

"How come it didn't work?" Seth asked.

"You gotta do it a special way," Adam told him.

"Show me," Seth said.

"Can't man," Adam said. "You just have to have the right touch. It's something you're born with."

Seth smirked. It figured. It was just his luck to be born without the touch that made truckers blow their horns.

The traffic was gradually getting thicker as the afternoon rush hour approached. Many of the drivers and passengers in the cars seemed unaware of the two boys on the overpass. But a few others stared up through their windshields at them.

"Bet they're wondering if we're gonna drop something on them," Adam said. He lifted his hand in the air as if he was holding an imaginary rock. On the highway more of the people were watching now. Suddenly Adam threw his arm forward. Even though there was nothing in his hand, a woman driving a blue Toyota put her hands up in fear. Her car swerved momentarily out of its lane.

Seth felt his jaw drop. He couldn't believe Adam had done that. If the car had been going faster it might have gone out of control and crashed into the stone abutment next to the highway.

Meanwhile Adam grinned at him. "Scared her to death."

"Maybe we ought to go," Seth said, suddenly worried that they were going to get into trouble. What if a cop had seen them? Or what if the woman was really mad?

"Why?" Adam asked.

"She could get off and come back here."

Adam shrugged. "Let her," he said. "The last person in the world I'd be afraid of is some old lady." He took a drag off of his cigarette and turned away to watch the cars again.

Seth kept glancing toward the exit ramp to see if the woman in the blue Toyota had gotten off. He was really tempted to leave, but he stayed because he liked being with Adam. It made him feel good that a cool guy like Adam let him hang around.

A few minutes passed and the blue Toyota still did not appear on the exit ramp. Seth relaxed a little. He had smoked his Marlboro almost all the way down to the filter and his mouth tasted awful. Smoke kept getting in his eyes and making them water. He dropped his cigarette to the sidewalk and crushed it under his sneaker, relieved to be finished with it.

"Here's the way to do it," Adam said. He took the butt of his cigarette between his thumb and middle finger and flicked it over the side of the bridge and down into the traffic. With a burst of red sparks it hit the windshield of a black Camaro passing below. Adam turned and grinned. Seth smiled back uncomfortably. He was beginning to wonder just how far Adam would go.

Neither of them saw the black Camaro pull off onto the exit ramp and come up behind them on the bridge. Seth didn't notice it until he heard a door slam. He turned and saw three big guys getting out of the car. They were all wearing nylon sweatsuits, and they looked strong. Seth suddenly decided that it was time to go, but he quickly realized that the three guys had spread out, cutting off any way to escape. He and Adam were surrounded.

"Uh, Adam." Seth nudged his elbow.

"Wha-?" Adam turned around and looked shocked. In the meantime the three guys were coming closer. Seth and Adam backed against the bridge wall. Seth felt his stomach tighten. His heart began to beat like a

machine gun. Adam looked pretty scared too. Was it Seth's imagination, or was his friend trembling?

"Which one of you twerps flicked that butt on my car?" The question came from the husky guy with a black moustache and long black hair that curled behind his ears.

Seth and Adam glanced at each other. Seth was determined not to tell. He didn't believe in squealing on his friends. But suddenly he noticed that all three guys were staring at him. He quickly looked at Adam and saw why. Adam was pointing at him.

Before Seth could say anything, the husky guy reached forward and lifted him off the ground by the collar of his jacket. His feet kicked in the air uselessly for a second and then he was thrown against the front fender of the Camaro. He hit with a thud and lost his breath. Before he had a chance to recover, the guy grabbed him by the hair and forced his face toward the windshield.

"Lick it off," he grumbled.

Seth didn't know what he was talking about. He tried to raise his head, but the husky guy pushed his face closer to the windshield. God, he was strong.

"I said, lick it."

Lick what? Seth wanted to shout. Then he looked down at the glass and saw the little spot of grey ash where Adam's cigarette had hit. Oh, no. He stiffened. The thought made him sick. He tried to twist his head around, but the guy leaned his weight against Seth and pushed his face down again.

"Till it's clean," the guy said, pressing Seth's face down until it was only a couple of centimetres from the smooth, tinted glass. Seth stared at the little spot of ash. With the husky guy's weight on him, he could hardly breathe. The car's fender was digging into his ribs. Where was Adam?

The husky guy leaned harder against him, squeezing Seth painfully against the car. He pushed Seth's face down until it actually pressed against the cool glass. Seth could feel a spasm in his chest as his lungs cried for air. But he clamped his mouth closed. He wasn't going to give the guy the satisfaction of seeing him lick that spot.

The husky guy must have known it. Suddenly he pulled Seth's head up, then slammed it back down against the windshield. *Wham* Seth reeled backwards, his hand covering his nose and mouth. Everything felt numb, and he was certain his nose and some of his teeth were broken. He slipped and landed in a sitting position, bending forward, his throbbing face in his hands.

A second passed and he heard someone laugh. Looking up he saw the three guys get back into the Camaro. The car lurched away, leaving rubber.

"You're bleeding." Adam was standing over him. Seth took his hand away from his mouth and saw that it was covered with bright red blood. It was dripping down from his nose and chin onto his denim jacket, leaving red

spots. At the same time he squeezed the bridge of his nose. It hurt, but somehow he knew it was not broken after all. He touched his front teeth with his tongue. They were all still there, and none felt loose.

"You want a hand?" Adam asked.

Seth nodded and Adam helped pull him up slowly. He was shaky on his feet and worried that his nose was going to start bleeding again. He looked down and saw that his denim jacket was covered with blood.

"I tried to help you," Adam said, "but one of them held a knife on me."

Seth glanced at him.

"It was a small knife," Adam said. "I guess he didn't want anyone to see it."

Seth felt his nose again. It was swollen and throbbed painfully. "Why'd you point at me?" he asked.

"I figured I could jump them if they made a move at you," Adam said. "How could I know they had knives?"

Seth shook his head. He didn't believe Adam. He started to walk toward home.

"You gonna make it okay?" Adam asked.

Seth nodded. He just wanted to be alone.

"I'll get those guys for you, man," Adam said. "I think I once saw one of them at the diner. I'm gonna go back there and see. Okay?"

Seth nodded again. He didn't even turn to watch Adam go.

On the way to his house, Seth stopped near some garbage cans a neighbour had put on the curb for collection. He looked down at his denim jacket. The spots of blood had turned dark. If he took it home and washed it now, the stains would probably make it look pretty cool. Like a jacket that had been worn in tons of fights. Seth smirked. He took it off and threw it in the garbage can.

Skippin' Out

-Nicole Bilyea

The first period bell had already rung, but I didn't move a muscle except for the foot inside my dirty high top sneaker, with its sloppy tongue rolling out and restrained by shredded laces. With a wet squeak I smushed a glowing cigarette butt into the pavement and squashed it like a fat bumblebee. I had spent too many mornings standing coolly in the smoking section, on a cracked slab of pavement about the size of my toy room, with two of my buddies, Zack and Q-Tip.

Q-Tip's real name was Quincy Tippings but only teachers who weren't his football coaches called him that. Anyone else got a hard punch in the arm. We had been standing outside in the smoking section since the city bus had dropped us off there at 8 o'clock that morning. Though it was nearing winter, wet, dreary, and altogether uncomfortable, my friends were there and the smoke kept me warm.

I would have rather been out there, feeling pretty cool but at the same time irrationally paranoid about my mom or aunt driving by, than in school. It was better than grade nine geography class at any rate. Rain drizzled, making my face cold. It pattered loudly on the black vinyl hood of my coat, which I had pulled over my head, zippered to the top and tucked my hands inside of the sleeves. Zack had the same coat, but neither of us ever really pointed that out.

Zack and Q-Tip smoked and skipped class a lot more than I did and were each a foot taller. Being short didn't bother me because I could still bench-press seventy-five pounds. I loved using the machines in the weight room in gym class, which I would be going to next period. I had gym with Zack, and I asked him if he was going.

"No way, dude. Gym class is gay."

Zack had been suspended from the football team for skipping class and hadn't been to gym all week. He went on to say that gym was a waste of time and that he was finding better things to do.

"Where did you go yesterday?" I asked, then spit on the pavement.

"Oh man, we totally got kicked out of the mall yesterday," Q-Tip said loudly, as some girls sitting on a bench with black makeup smudged and dripping around their eyes because of the rain, looked up at him. He caught their glance, spit, and continued loudly, letting out a forceful guffaw. "Yeah, man. This dumbass security guard kicked out me and Zack yesterday. Brought us right to the door and booted us out. It was so fricken' funny. It was awesome."

Zack laughed rowdily and added, "Oh yeah. We like totally went on these little-kid quarter rides. You know that horse thing by the pay phone?" I nodded and he continued, "Yeah, well, we totally got on that thing, and I was slappin' its ass and makin' all these noises, pretendin' like I was

swinging a lasso in the air. Oh, it was so funny. Got all these old moms starin' and givin' us dirty looks. It was awesome."

I laughed and gave him a shove. "Dude, that is so gay." I knew it would have been funny though to see them causing a scene like that.

"No way, man," Q-Tip continued. "It was hilarious. We went into the drug store and dropped three boxes of mustache bleach into some old lady's cart. We just, like, snuck up and dropped 'em in when she wasn't looking. You should have seen her face when she went to check out. It was so funny. She was all like, 'I didn't put these in here.' It was so great I almost died laughing."

He looked as though he could die from laughter now, gripping his stomach, keeling over with a wide gaping mouth in the center of his broad, red face, eyes watering. He was hooting and snorting as he told this, laughing loudly. I laughed too as he told the story. "Oh, dude, I wish I was with you guys yesterday," I said, chuckling.

"Oh man, it was so funny," Zack said for the fourth time in their story, propping his hat so it sat on top of his head but not firmly around it, the brim tipped slightly off-kilter and pointing up. It looked like a little wind could knock it off but I wore my hat this way too, and I fixed it as well. My hat was the envy of my friends because it looked like it had a pot leaf on it. It was really from my uncle's seed company and it was actually a hemp leaf that was on it, but I put black electrical tape over the words Steve's Seeds, Specializing in Hemp and Millet in Partnership with Agri-Corp and it looked pretty cool.

Zack continued, "Then me and Q started walking up the down escalator. Like, walking up the one that you're supposed to go down on. And, like, we're not getting' anywhere, right? Everyone kept staring and that stupid security guard flipped out on us. Just totally lost it, practically dragged us by the ear to the door and kicked us right out! But the joke's on him because we kicked in the side of the garbage can outside the mall. Left a huge dent. Woulda tipped it over but it was screwed right to the cement." They were laughing a lot now, giving each other a high five and shaking their heads in amusement.

Still chuckling at their story, I said, "Man, that sounds like it would have been a sweet time."

"It was, dude, but I have to go back to my house and pick up some more smokes 'cause I'm out," Q said, tossing the empty pack at the chain-link fence. "Wanna come?"

He had asked me to go to his house before when we had skipped in the morning, but it always made me mad. He knew I couldn't go because my grandpa was a crossing guard on his street for the primary school kids. I told him no and that he knew I couldn't with an annoyed tone and wrinkled eyebrows, kicking some of the soggy cigarette butts in front of me. I hated when they left me there by myself.

The two of them waved me off with a "Whatever, dude," and swaggered away with a surly bounce, slouched, with their hands in their pockets. They spit to the side occasionally as they walked away, leaving me standing in the smoking section alone. I would have stuck them the finger but my hands were too cold.

The girls on the bench looked up at me through their grey-ringed eyes, snickering between themselves and giggling quietly. I felt my face turn red. I had to look like I had somewhere to go, so with an intentionally squeaky twist of my wet foot on the mushy, spongy butts, I turned around and started walking towards the mall. I bet I could stir up some trouble there, maybe even get kicked out myself. Thinking of all the hilarious pranks I could pull there to top my friends, I headed towards the bridge to the mall, checking that none of my teachers were standing in the parking lot.

After passing a flurry of traffic on the bridge, including a big dump truck and one cop car, the mall was finally in view. I shook my head after all the noisy clatter and rattle of the bridge as my squeaky shoes returned to solid cement sidewalk. I was glad the cop didn't see me and try to question me or something. The walk from there to the mall was short, and at last I reached its doors, being cleaned by a guy in a striped blue shirt and a graying beard with a squeegee.

He turned and looked at me with his heavy-lidded eyes and I smiled a little, but he turned away slowly and continued cleaning the glass doors, uninterested in why I was there. I smirked and thought to myself, just wait until he sees the hell I can raise around here.

The mall was empty. Well, not quite empty, but it was so dead that I could hear the muzak piping quietly through the speakers. I had never noticed it when I was there the week before buying my new coat with my mom. A few elderly shoppers teetered around, carrying plastic shopping baskets. I thought about all the funny stuff I could slip into them when they weren't looking.

I was really hungry for some breakfast, and I headed for the upstairs food court. I glanced into a couple stores as I walked down the long mall corridor. It seemed bigger than I remembered, and I took in the way the light shone on the floor through the sky roof, bouncing off the fake fig trees and ferns I hadn't noticed before. It was big, almost vacant and oddly quiet, except for the muzak and buzzing of electronics from the Radio Shack I had just passed.

To me, the mall had always been a place of noise, boisterous energy and motion. It was where my friends and I bought water guns in the summer, goofed around in photo booths and bought coolers from the beverage refrigerator in the variety store. Today, it would be a difficult place to cause a commotion, but I knew how to cause a ruckus.

Somewhere between Mattress Depot and You Name It, We Frame It, I halted. There, in front of me, was my chance for mischief in the form of a

moving staircase. I looked around me as I stood before the escalator: a few ladies with strollers, window-shopping, a man with big boots and a fistful of lottery tickets sitting at a bench, another lady discussing something at the cell phone counter, and a stocky man in a navy suit and big belt, standing with his hands on his hips - a security guard.

Perfect. I dashed up the escalator, taking long strides over the steps, laughing as I defeated each one, my puffyvinyl coat making swish-swoosh sounds as the sleeves pumped against my sides while my bookbag thumped as it bounced against my back. I kept trying to take bigger leaps over the stairs, feeling the burn of the security guard's eyes on the back of my head. I couldn't wait to tell Zack and Q how "it was so funny."

Then, just as I was about to reach the top after my mad marching leaps, a man with a cane hobbled onto the escalator. He looked at me curiously through horn-rimmed glasses and smiled. I meekly smiled back and awkwardly rode the rest of the way down on the escalator. I glanced at the security guard. He was still standing with his hands on his hips, but smiling and talking to one of the ladies with a stroller, then bending down to coo at the baby and share some joke with the mother. I could still see a pair of shiny handcuffs hanging from his belt, though. He noticed that I was a fast runner, so I knew that was why he had kept them in his belt. His walkie-talkie was readily available, though, clipped to his belt just beside where his right hand was resting, and I think he looked at me in the corner of his eye.

As the old man with the cane wobbled off the landing of the escalator, he shook his head and said, "Try the other one, boy." I ignored him and turned around in an attempt to conquer a few more steps, but after looking behind and seeing that I was invisible to the shoppers below and that the security guard had wandered down the hallway, I gave up and rode the rest of the way down.

After wandering aimlessly for a little while around in the photo store so it wouldn't look like I was crazy about escalators, I got on to the one going up, as my stomach growled at me for not having fed it breakfast yet. The food court was practically empty too, except for a few people sitting down to tie a shoelace or adjust a purse strap. Several of the booths had metal blinds pulled down over them, and none of them had any lights on.

Luckily, Ted's Chicken, my favourite place for wings, had their blinds rolled up and a man in a white apron and paper hat bustled around inside of it. I walked up to the booth, slapped down the money I had in my pocket and said, "Ten 'Teddy Fingers,' please!" The man in the paper hat turned around, gave a lopsided grin, and shook his whole body in one smug chuckle.

"Sorry kid, I'm just here doing maintenance and I need some air. We ain't open 'til ten o'clock." My heart sank and stomach growled louder. "Why don't ya go down the hall their and try that coffee place? They've got great

biscotti." I didn't want great biscotti. I didn't want to be called "kid," either. Letting out a frustrated growl, this time from the back of my throat, I grabbed my money and shoved it back into my pocket.

I had given up on breakfast and instead decided to resort back to my original plan. There had to be some place to cause a nuisance and get someone to call over that security guard. As I passed the coffee place with the great biscotti, a few old men sat at the tables in a small café area, drinking coffee and reading newspapers. I laughed to myself at their funny-looking wool hats and remembered to prop mine up. I turned my head away from them as they caught my stare and a golden glint caught my eye.

Right across from where the geezers were sitting was the glittering yellow kiddy ride that Zack had gone onto and caused a big uproar. I grinned and thought about what a riot it must have been as I walked up towards its sparkly blue saddle. I looked behind me to make sure the crowd of old people were watching, mounted the horse backwards, and slipped a quarter into Bucky the Bronco. It started bucking, rocking back and forth with an action much gentler than I had anticipated. It made the sound of a kitchen blender being turned on and off, its mechanical noises grating and drowning out most of the elevator music. I gave it a hard slap and looked back at my audience. Some were indifferently chewing breakfast croissants and sipping coffee, while others gazed up at me over ruffled newspapers and tea cups in silence.

I tested them by letting out a soft "Wooh, wooh!" I thought about crying out a loud, "Yee Haw!" but instead I stupidly rode the horse without saying another word, letting Bucky rock me back and forth until the motorized whizzing droned and the ride became still. I sheepishly dismounted the ride, and without looking at the old people who were probably just too deaf and blind to notice me. I slipped into the drug store. I almost fell over when I ran into a husky lady with blonde curls and a strong perfumey odour that could have knocked me out itself. She apologized and looked down at me. She had a bright blue suit on and a name tag that read: "Pennington's: Sue."

"I'm sorry, hon, are you lost?" she said softly, looking down at me quizzically, with a big, lips ticked smile.

"No, I'm not," I said quickly, and squeezed behind her into the next aisle. A few shoppers lingered and browsed the products on the shelves. I thought about Zack and Q's story about the old lady and bleach cream and I laughed to myself. A few people turned around to look at me but I turned away and pretended to be shopping myself. This was an opportunity to see for myself the look on someone's face as they get caught buying excessive amounts of embarrassing products.

One lady was bent over, reading labels of different lotions and leaving her basket sitting in the aisle as she pursued the items on the shelves. I quickly looked around me, and trying to avoid suspicion, casually grabbed a

couple of tubes off of the shelf. In a relaxed way, I gradually sauntered over to where the lady was bent over. Suddenly she snapped up. The outfit she wore was odd, red and yellow, but what stood out was the hanging nametag with the drugstore logo strung around her neck. She, too, had a wide, happy smile.

"Hey there, little guy!" She said, cocking her head to one side. "Can I give you a hand? I'm sorry; I was bent over there restocking some foot lotions! What can I do for you?"

I mumbled something about "just looking," but she saw the long boxes gripped in my hand.

"Jock itch, eh? Well we've got the cure for what ails 'ya. There are a number of different creams and powders here, depending on what you're looking for. Do you have sensitive skin? Maybe you should talk to Mum or Dad about this, too, dear."

Frustrated, I turned around and without answering, tossed the tubes back on to the shelf and hurried into another aisle. I could feel my cheeks burning. I was feeling embarrassed, hungry, and defeated. I wandered around a few aisles, trying to avoid Pennington Sue and The Drug Store Lady, dodging into different sections.

Finally, I reached the last aisle, where rows of newspapers and magazines were on display. No one else was in the aisle, so I decided to at least hide my face by burying it in a magazine. I picked up the Auto Trader and started flipping the pages. I heard footsteps behind me, but I kept my face buried and ignored whoever was strolling behind me down the aisle. For several minutes I flipped through Auto Trader, not really reading, but trying to fight tears and firm a trembling bottom lip and go unnoticed. The pages of the ads and autos were meaningless and I almost ripped a few flimsy pages as I hastily flipped through it with a shaking hand.

I wished I was in gym class, lifting weights or even back in the smoking section, but where I really wanted to go was home. I decided that I would just calmly and quickly exit the store and head directly back to school. I flipped through the last couple of pages when a voice bellowed, "Hey! You! This ain't no library!"

I crammed the magazine back into the rack and exasperatingly made a dash for the exit. As I was running out, I heard a hollow crash, sounds of things sliding across the tile floor and a great scattering of…gum packets. My book bag, swinging behind me, had knocked over a display of chewing gum, sending packets of it sliding across the room. The man shouted again. "You gonna buy something, kid, or just knock stuff around?"

I stood there in a daze, blubbering. I looked at the strewn gum packets as Pennington Sue and The Drug Store Lady scuttled about, picking up the chewing gum. The Drug Store Lady looked up at me and said, with a much grimmer smile, "Dear, if you're not interested in buying anything, we'll have to ask you to leave." Feeling helpless and humiliated, having received

none of the attention I wanted and all of the attention I didn't want, I looked down at my wet, sloppy shoes.

I muttered under my breath, "Well, maybe I just will, then," trying to give a little bit of attitude and defiance but feeling like a fool. Without looking up, I sped quickly out of the store. Behind me, I could hear a shuffling stampede. The rush of boisterous conversation, the slosh of water bottles being shaken and the squeaking and clopping of a mob of shoes grew louder and more vigorous behind me. A horde of smiling and chattering people. Arms pumping enthusiastically at their sides were closing in on me. They walked briskly, chests proudly displaying MALL WALKERS pins and t-shirts.

As the crowd enveloped me, becoming disoriented in a group of noisy and animated exercisers with socks pulled high, shorts pulled higher and Cardio Blast blaring from a pair of earphones, I pushed my way through the group. I ran past the doors, past the window-cleaner who now wielded a mop and bucket. My soggy shoes slopped and splashed against the puddled sidewalk as I made my way over the bridge, dodging dog-walkers and other pedestrians.

I whizzed back to school, hoping I could still make the end of gym class. I finally stopped when I reached the smoking section. The second period bell rang, and feeling exhausted and defeated, I plopped down on a damp bench.

"C.J.! Ceej!" I heard a familiar, raspy voice shout behind me. Q-Tip ran up to greet me, glowing cigarette in hand. "Where'd you go, man?" he asked.

I looked down at my feet, pulled my hands inside my jacket sleeves and flicked my hat up. "Dude, I totally just got kicked out of the mall."