

Gardiner Library

YA Literary Magazine



Winter 2021

GARDINER INK

WINTER 2021

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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

GARDINER INK was born from a group of creative young adults who love to write and were ready to share their work with the world. We started this project in March of 2020. When the library couldn't be open for programming due to the pandemic, the literary magazine staff emailed work regularly and meet monthly through Zoom. This was truly a project of positive energy, talent and resilience. What was supposed to be an online magazine grew into a publication we wanted to share in book form, as well.

Submissions were received from teens in our local area as well as surrounding towns. Also included are the contest winners from the American Tall Tale Contest held during the 2020 Summer Reading Program.

Thank you to Library Director Nicole Lane for her encouragement and support. Special thanks to the Friends of the Gardiner Library for financing the publication of this issue.

This is only the beginning and we welcome others to join us as we prepare for our next issue. Anyone interested in joining our staff or contributing, please contact cthorenz@rcls.org.

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Crash Down Around You

The Calm Seas,
The Raging Oceans,

The Water Rushing,
Floating Across The Beach,
The Sound Of The Waves
Crashing Together,
The Taste Of The Salty Sea
Air,
The Sea Breeze,

As
The
Waves
Crash
Down
Around
You

Norah Nielson

Burn Brighter

it rages inside you,
begging to be set free,
you run,
it follows,

it sparks
it roars
it's yours

Let
The
Fire
Burn
Brighter

Norah Nielson

Lighter Than Air

a Gentle Breeze,
Rustling the Trees,
Sending Waves Across Seas,
Let the Fire Burn Brighter,
Let it Make You Feel Lighter,
Than Air

Nora Nielson

River of Solace

It is still,
Calm,
Slow ripples of blue and green,
Rocking the boats to sleep.
Gentle, crisp wind blowing from east
to west, gently pressing against my
cheeks,
numb, but in the best possible way.
I want to leap in with a light force,
not disrupting the serenity, but the
water allowing me to join it in its
peace.
I would like to feel the pure, sparkling
water on my skin,
Soaking my hair, making it heavy in
gratitude and calmness,
Filling my ears with quietude,
So nothing else in life has to exist,
And I can find comfort, undismayed
by the loudness of the world framing
this river.

Ariel Yarmus

BIRCH

by

Kristie Benel

Kaity walked with her friends in the forest next to the town where she had been staying in for almost three weeks. Little Springville, Idaho. Kaity loved it here. Ever since she could remember, her family had come here every year to see an old college friend. They hadn't visited for quite some time though, and Kaity was desperate to spend as much time with her best friends Lizzy and Ellen as possible.

She was leaving tomorrow after all.

As they chatted, Kaity took in all the sights and smells around her. She wanted to remember every detail. They reached the bottom of a large hill and began to scale its side. Earlier in the day, Kaity had declared that she had wanted to carve her name into a huge birch tree at the top of a hill in the middle of the forest. That was where they were headed now.

As the thick cover of the trees cleared, they caught sight of their destination. They ran the rest of the way, and leaned panting on the trunk of the birch. It was even bigger than Kaity had imagined now that she was close. She took a step back to examine the trunk, and find the ideal spot for carving. When she found a nice spot, she pulled out her Swiss army knife and began etching her name.

KAITY

When she was satisfied with her work, she wiped her knife with her shirt and put it back in her pocket.

"Done!" she said, stepping back to admire her handiwork.

Her friends came over to look at what she'd done. Ellen said, "That's really good, Kaity!"

"Yeah! Really impressive," Lizzy added approvingly.

They admired Kaity's name for a brief moment more, then started back down the mountain. As they walked through the forest, Kaity thought about how much she would miss this place once she and her family left. At least she and her friends could text each other. This was something new, for Kaity's parents hadn't allowed her to get a phone until she was thirteen. Her birthday had been three months ago, and they had given her a phone with a case that looked like a panda.

She could already hear the small brook that bordered the town, babbling in the

in the distance. It was nearing five o'clock and her last day was coming to a close. The next morning she would pack her bags and be on her way back to Washington. Kaity had slept soundly, but now everyone was rushing to get ready to leave. They had two more bags to pack, and only three hours until their plane departed. Kaity grabbed some shirts, roughly folded them, and threw them into a bag. Her mother was running from room to room, searching for missing clothes. Her dad was attempting to close his overly stuffed briefcase by sitting on it. Finally, they all seemed satisfied that they had everything packed, and began loading their bags into their car. When they had finished, it was time for goodbyes. Kaity hated this part. It always made her insides feel like they were being torn apart. Ellen was crying and Lizzy looked like she was losing her own mother. Kaity went over and hugged her friends. "I'll be back," Kaity said. Lizzy and Ellen nodded, and they hugged each other again. Meanwhile, Kaity's parents were dealing with their teary friend. "Make sure to call me when you get to the airport," she said. "Yes Cathrine," Kaity's mother replied. "Make sure to order enough food on the plane, George," Cathrine said. "I know," Kaity's father answered. "Oh Anne, I do wish you would take this blanket with you. It get so terribly cold during those flights!" "I'm sure we'll manage" Kaity's mother answered. This continued for quite some time until Kaity's parents just gave Cathrine one last hug and they all piled into their rent-a-car. Their friends waved after them until they were just a speck in the horizon, and finally disappeared altogether. When they arrived at the airport, they called Cathrine, as promised, then raced through security, only barely making it in time to catch their plane. The flight home was boring and Kaity was desperate to have it done with. When they finally arrived back in Washington, Kaity had an even longer and more boring car ride home to look forward to.

Finally, they rode up their driveway and parked in the garage. Kaity opened the door to their house and ran inside collapsing on the sofa. She took in all the familiar smells of home, and for a moment was happy to be back. After a quick rest, she got up and helped her parents unload the car and put everything away. When they had finished, they sat down and enjoyed a quiet dinner as a happy family.

Kaity went to bed early that night and had a long, restful sleep. The next morning, she awoke refreshed and was looking forward to the day ahead of her. As she went down for breakfast, the familiar smell of slightly burned, Pillsbury Dough Boy cinnamon rolls flooded her senses.

"Morning!" she said to her parents as she neared the table where they were sitting.

"Morning, sweetie!" they said together.

Kaity sat down and took one of the rolls. She bit into it, savoring the sweetness.

"Mmm," she said, chewing.

Kaity and her parents enjoyed their breakfast then sat down for their daily meeting. Every day they sat down on the big living room couches and discussed what they had to do that day.

"The office is having a meeting today," Kaity's mother said, "and they want everyone in attendance."

"Does that mean I'll be home alone?" Kaity asked.

"Only for a little while," her father replied.

They went through everything else that needed to get done that day, then called their meeting adjourned. Everyone went their separate ways and Kaity went to her room to read a book she had been meaning to finish for quite some time. A few hours later, George and Anne kissed their daughter good-bye and left for their meeting.

Kaity sat down on the soft, cushiony couch and turned on her favorite TV show. It was about a young, teenage spy named Colette, fighting crime and raining justice down upon the evil villains of France. Sometimes when Kaity was home alone, she would pretend that she was Colette, and run around the house fighting invisible

evildoers. But only when she was alone.

She was already up to her third episode when she felt a strange vibration in the ground. Could it have been an earthquake? No, she thought, this is different. She paused her show and glanced down at the ground. Suddenly, the floorboards right in front of the couch, shot up and hit the ceiling before falling back to the ground.

Kaity sprang to her feet, backing away from the now gaping hole in the floor.

Before she could get very far though, a huge white root sprang up from the hole and wrapped itself around Kaity. She screamed as it pulled her into the opening in the ground. She tried to resist but the root was too strong. She clawed at the bark, tearing huge chunks off, but she was slipping farther and farther into the cellar below her.

Soon, she was completely in the basement where she discovered another gaping hole in the ground. Before she was pulled into this hole as well, she gave one last, horrified scream, before completely disappearing into the earthy darkness that awaited her. She was roughly pulled through a narrow passageway underground, which was made even narrower by a second root that was shooting passed her, back towards her house.

This second root emerged through the opening in the living room and perfectly replaced all the floorboards. It then pulled back into the cellar where it replaced the pieces of remarkably well broken cement and earth. When everything was covered up, it returned into the passageway, past Kaity, and into the darkness beyond, leaving everything in the house as it had been.

Two hours later, Anne and George returned home from their long, and very boring meeting.

"Kaity! We're home!" Anne cried, as she put down her purse. When there was no answer, she went upstairs and called her daughter's name once more. There again was no answer.

"Do you know where Kaity is?" she asked George.

"No, isn't she in her room?"

Anne shook her head. They began searching the house, calling their daughter's

name, but she was nowhere to be found. They saw her phone on the couch, which meant there was no way to reach her. That's when they noticed the white tree bark, like from a birch tree, laying on the ground.

George picked up one of the pieces and looked at his wife quizzically. They walked to the front door and called outside. Again, there was no answer. Beginning to worry, they started pacing the floor.

"Do you think she ran away?" Anne asked worriedly.

"Why would she run away?"

"You don't think she was kidnapped, do you?!"

"No, of course not," George replied, embracing his wife, who was shaking by now.

"Should we call the police?" Anne asked.

"Let's wait a while. Maybe she just went out for a walk and forgot her phone."

They both knew this was very unlikely, but they wanted to hope for the best scenario. They sat down at the kitchen table and waited. Soon five minutes had passed. Those five minutes turned into ten minutes. Soon an hour had already gone by and there was not so much as a knock on the door.

"I think it's time to call the police," George finally said.

Anne ran to the phone and dialed 911. A woman's voice answered the call.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Yes hello? It's my daughter. She's disappeared." Anne replied, now through tears.

"Alright, what's your name ma'am?"

"Anne Kemper."

"Okay, what's your address?"

"189 New Brooke Avenue, Wellington."

"Alright. Just calm down and we'll send a squad car to you."

"Thank you."

Anne hung up and sank back down into her chair. A few minutes later, the police car showed up in their driveway. Two serious looking police officers got out of the car and strode up to the front door. When they rang, George hurried to let them inside. One police officer was tall and fat, with glossy black hair. He introduced himself as Mike. His partner was short and slim, and he had a thick

Russian accent. He was introduced as Broznek. George explained the situation to them, and they began to search the house. When they found the white bark in the living room, they examined it carefully and declared that it was indeed from a western paper birch.

Further examination of the house revealed nothing more. The officers requested a recent picture of Kaity and gave George their number promising to call if anything turned up. After displaying their greatest hopes for Kaity's safety, they showed themselves out the front door.

As the day continued, Anne and George became more and more dispirited. Where could their daughter be? The police hadn't called even once all day, and it was already almost six. Anne's face was red and swollen from crying, and George had begun to wear away the polish on the floor from pacing. Hours ticked by and soon they were beginning to give up hope of finding her that night.

"I think we should try to get some sleep," George said finally.

Anne nodded and they reluctantly went to their room. They got in bed and covered themselves with the warm blankets. No matter how hard they tried to sleep though, their bodies would not give them the liberty. Anne eventually got up and retrieved some sleeping pills from the bathroom cupboard. A little while later, they had both fallen into a deep, restless sleep.

When they awoke early the next morning, they were exhausted. Though they had slept, they barely noticed it. At nine o'clock, the police called to see how Anne and George were doing, and to report that they had not yet found Kaity. The day passed slowly for her devastated parents, and they ate little.

Mike and Broznek came back to their house and searched it over again. This time they discovered the cracked cement in the cellar. Using a crowbar, they gently lifted the pieces revealing the passageway underneath. Broznek (being the smaller and thinner of the two) attempted to go inside but found that it was too narrow. Mike announced the he would return with a dog and release him into the tunnel.

An hour later he returned with a bored looking German Shepherd and let him into the tunnel with a camera attached to his collar. Five minutes later, the tunnel came to an abrupt end.

"Come on back, Champ," Mike called to his dog. Soon his furry head popped

up out of the ground. "Sorry we couldn't find more," he said to Anne and George.

"The way the tunnel was dug is very peculiar though, and I'm sure we'll find something from it."

They walked back upstairs and said their good-byes.

The police did not call for the rest of the day, and soon midnight had arrived.

Anne and George took their sleeping pills and crawled into bed.

"Oh George! Do you think she's still alive?" Anne asked, sobbing.

"I'm sure she is." George held his wife and wished he could go out and find Kaity himself. He knew that would be pointless though, so he settled on simply being there for her. Although he felt like breaking down in tears himself, he knew he had to be strong for her sake. Before he could give it any more thought however, he slipped into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning, though they had slept little, Anne and George awoke with a fresh feeling of hope. They ate some breakfast and waited for the police to call.

At nine o'clock, the phone rang and Broznek reported that they were currently looking into what the tunnel had been dug with. They had also put out an alert on the national news station letting everyone know that Kaity was missing.

"We will find her," he said in his Russian accent.

Anne and George mostly sat during the day, waiting and hoping that Kaity might find her way home. At seven o'clock in the evening, George suggested they go out for a walk.

"A walk?" Anne asked.

"Yeah," George replied. "It would do us a lot of good to get out of here, maybe clear our minds."

"But what if she comes back?"

"We won't be gone long."

Anne finally relented and put on her shoes. They were quiet as they walked around the neighborhood, thinking their own thoughts, but it was good that way. They listened to the birds in the trees, and watched a squirrel carrying a nut. The walked calmed them so they could think straight again and pay attention to what was happening around them.

As they neared their house, they began to feel a new sort of calm; like in the eye of a hurricane. Anne leaned her head on her husband's shoulder, and they walked like that until they reached the start of their driveway. The sun was already

beginning to set, and the sky was becoming a beautiful orange color. They stood there, looking out over the big field opposite their house and watched the sun go down, both wishing that their beloved daughter could be there with them.

Suddenly, Anne's head jerked upwards and she looked straight ahead of her. George looked in the same direction and spotted a small figure in the distance. They stood there, staring at the approaching form, not daring to blink lest it might disappear.

Closer and closer the person got, and with every passing second, they could distinguish more and more features. It was definitely a young woman, maybe a girl. Soon she got close enough for them to recognize her matted brown hair and her torn clothes. Eventually, she got so close that they could see her face. It was dirty and cut, but you could tell she was pretty. Not only was she pretty, but she was also Kaity. Their daughter had returned to them.

Anne and George rushed to her and wrapped her in a loving embrace. They sank to the ground crying and held each other. Well, at least Anne and George were crying. Kaity seemed to be showing no emotion at all. She wasn't smiling or crying, laughing or screaming, and her eyes held a constant faraway look. Her father lifted her up and carried her inside where they laid her down on the couch and gave her some water. She drank it, and it seemed to bring her slightly out of her trance.

"Kaity?" her mother said.

Kaity looked up at her mother, and then to her father. She shook her head as if clearing some kind of drowsiness. "Mom? Dad?"

"Oh, my Kaity!" Anne said, embracing her once again.

"I'll call Mike," her father said.

A little while later, Mike and Broznek arrived at the house and greeted the reunited family. They introduced themselves to Kaity and told her they were glad she was safe. Finally, George asked her the question that had been burning inside all of them.

"So Kaity," he said, "where have you been these past few days?"

Kaity paused a moment and looked as if she was thinking about something. "I don't know," she said finally.

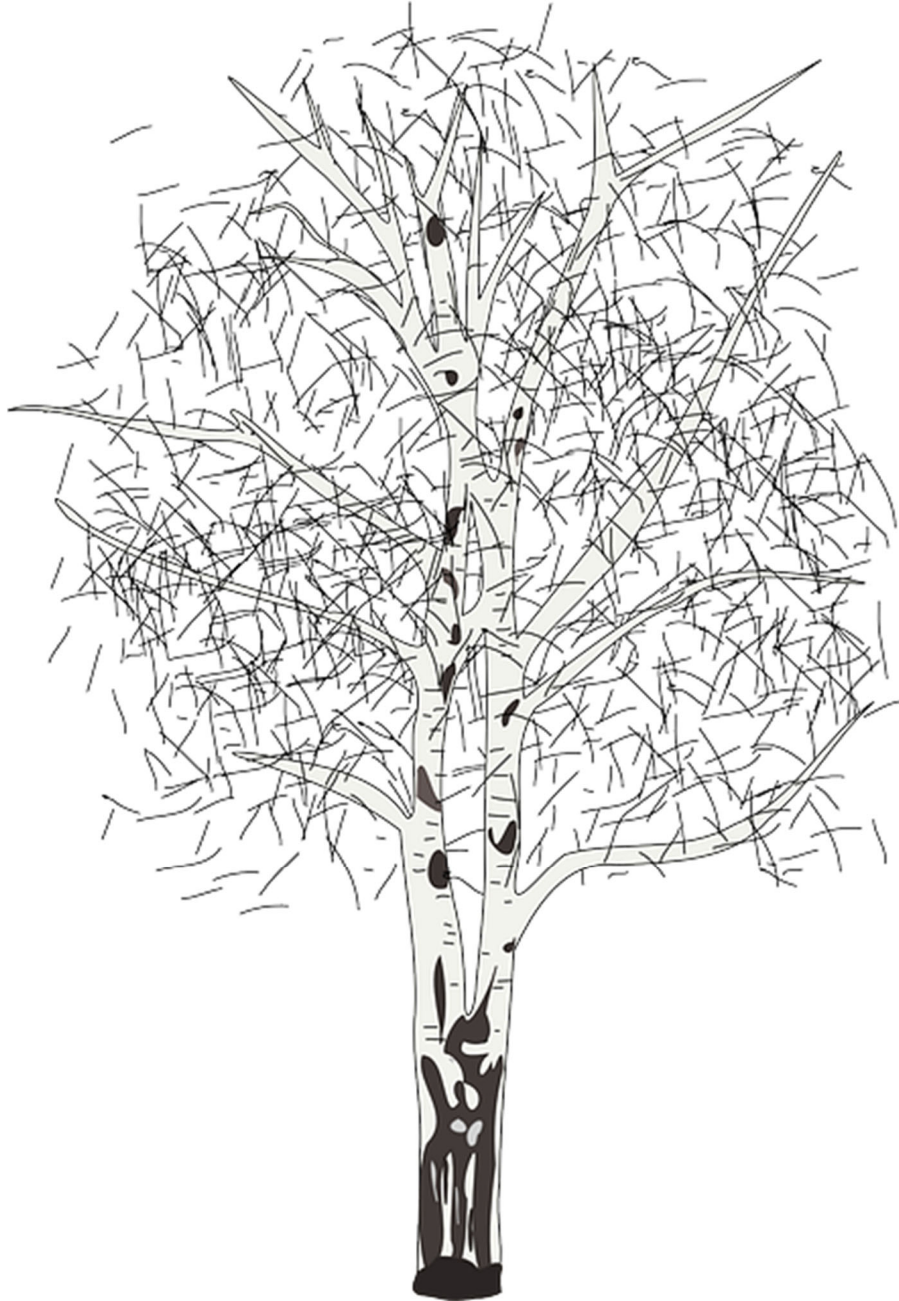
This answer took them all off guard. "What do you mean you don't know?"

Anne asked.

"I don't know where I've been," she replied, and they would never find out. No matter how many times she was asked, by her parents, her friends, or by the police, she could never seem to remember. The only clue as to where she had been, were five bloody letters etched into her back.

BIRCH

END



Do you remember?

Do you remember?

When we leapt into the sky,

Insouciant, witty

Golden brown, curly hair blowing in the wind,

into our mouths as we ate the clouds, the fog,

and all of the possibilities felt endless.

Do you remember? R

running freely

Playing until our youthful lungs filled with giggles, and

tired us out

And we had the happiest of worriless days.

Do you remember?

The days in which we lived in a world of creativity and
childish passion,

A bed became our whole world,

Blankets closing us out from reality,

running fiercely through an ancient brick temple, en-
countering the most obscure creatures

Until we were called out of our world to eat our chick-
en nuggets.

We left those days,

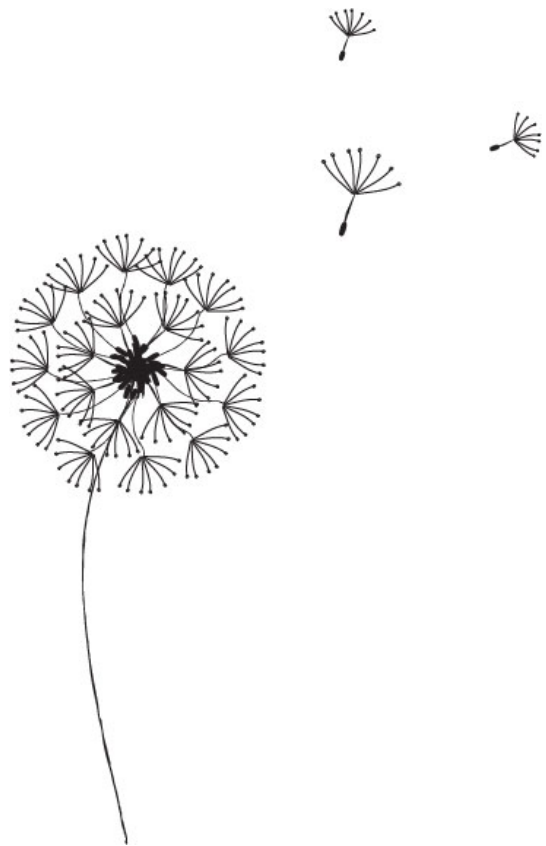
But don't you forget

The fierce, impish, lighthearted curly haired, baby
brown eyed children.

I remember our charming little souls,

And don't you forget.

-Ariel Yarmus



Find Your Way

The layers of soil
Fade into layers of grass
Run towards the trees
Sit down to rest in a mead-
ow

Calm
Alone
At peace

Find a common ground
with yourself
Run across the fields of
gold

Look to the path
That you
Take to
Find your way



Speak

A Short Story by Jackie Rivera

Hello, if you don't know me already (well obviously you don't know me if you're reading this), my name is Annabelle McCartney. I'm just your typical 8th grade Vermont girl who loves playing soccer and doing gymnastics competitions. Shifting over to my other side- the one that I've never really talked about before- is a different story.

I've always been afraid to open up- to literally anyone really. Ever since my mom died from a tragic car accident four years ago, I was forced to open up to my stepmom, Jessica. You see, I don't trust her because my dad chose her over my own mother- and that's how my original parents got divorced. I don't know why, but Jessica really gets on my nerves! Maybe it's because I'm not used to having someone else to call, "mom."

A lot of scenarios happened from me being too nice to people. Katie and Tom for example, they used to be my best friends. Not anymore! Not after they took advantage of me. Here's how it all started. One day in study hall, I was doing my English homework, and I just let them copy off my homework like that! And that's when Sophie knew something was wrong. I was being bullied without even knowing it.

Who's Sophie, you ask? That's my best friend Elizabeth's mom. Unlike Katie and Tom, Ellie's a real one. So is her mom. I mean, I'm closer with her than my own stepmom! Ellie and I were the "big gossip" in our school a year ago after "exposing" Shelby. She was the most popular girl in our school. She was the one that spread rumors about every little thing.

No matter what it was, the school seemed to believe it. Not us though! We recorded Shelby during numerous occasions where she would practically use her classmates- or play with them like little toys. Then, we made a compilation and uploaded it to the school website- without permission. Of course, we got suspended for it and Shelby was unharmed. We ended up being the laughing-stock of the whole school for the rest of the school year.

Anyway, that was in 7th grade. It's time to put that in the past and focus on this year. We were at our final soccer game. The championship. It was all or nothing. The Randolph Tigers were the best team in the state- and we were against them. I knew I couldn't mess it up for the team. But I kept having flashbacks from when Katie and Tom spread rumors about me. They kept saying how I was ditching their friend group because I decided to stand up for myself. It's not my fault that that toxic friend group was my only friends at lunch!

Now I'm forced to sit alone- sometimes in the girls' bathroom- because nobody will simply just sit with me. Even my sister Amelia won't leave a seat for me. She'll always say, "You're pathetic. Stop trying to be a wannabe, would you?" and ignore me the rest of the day. Believe it or not, she's actually the younger one; she's just a spoiled brat just like the rest of the group.

Back to the game. I was the goalie, and Ellie got put on offense. That's actually her strongest position, which was supposed to give us an advantage. I say "supposed to" because I was too distracted. As a goalie, that's not a good thing. After the first half, the score was 2-1. I wasn't too distracted then; I was

somewhat focused.

Coach Kelly was saying to us, “Wildcats, it’s the final half. It’s all or nothing. Sanchez, good goal by the way. I’m glad I put you as offense for the first half. I’m going to switch you up as defense for the second half.” Great! That’s Ellie’s worst position (especially left wing). “Wales, you’re on offense now. The rest of you, make sure to have a good game plan and build upon your skills towards the end. Make it the final push. Oh, and McCartney, don’t mess up like you did last year.” Whoops! I forgot that I basically let the team down last year after passing out on the field. We didn’t even make quarterfinals.

I couldn’t focus though; with the thought of last year’s game now in my head, I was in danger. Thankfully, the players were closer to the opponent’s goal, so I was in the clear- for now. Oh no; they were coming my way! Focus Anna, focus, I said to myself. I couldn’t. The thoughts just kept overwhelming my head. I couldn’t take it anymore! Two more minutes until the game was over, and the score was now 3-3.

There goes the Tigers’ team captain, Mia Ellis. She’s getting ready to strike; I can see it in her eyes. The entire crowd is silent, the clock is going, Tick, Tick, Tick every long and meaningful second. Focus Anna, focus, I say again. There goes the ball, flying gracefully yet aggressively in the air. I try to catch the ball, but then it flies out of my hands. No overtime for us. While the Randolph Tigers are busy celebrating, the rest of the Windsor County Wildcats (which is my team, by the way), were in shock. I just started crying on the field; I couldn’t believe it! I have let my team down- again.

After the game, Ellie’s mom picked us up. I mean, we still got a medal for second place, but it was honestly the worst game of my life. “Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself,” Ellie says to me. I am now ready to let all my inner anger out and ready to punch anyone in sight. Yeah, that’s how stubborn and hard on myself I am. I sigh. There’s nothing else I can do, so I might as well just open up my phone.

My phone- my only escape from reality. Ever since I got it, I was hooked on it. During the summer of 7th grade, I made the Wildcats’ travel squad, so it was basically a “congratulations” gift from my dad. I still don’t trust him as far as I can throw him though. I open up Snaptube, which is my favorite app by far! But it’s pretty much a toxic app; Ellie’s not even allowed to have it because of just that! The first thing I see on the “Featured Videos” page- Allie Stone. She’s the most popular creator on this app, and she is gorgeous! I don’t follow her though because I’m also very insecure about myself. I let it get to my head and it makes me feel, well- depressed in some sort of way.

Two hours later, we get home. Ellie’s dad made cookies and milk for after the game. Since I hate cookies, I leave them all for Ellie and Sophie and start munching on vegetables (yeah, I’m not your normal junk-loving teen). Ellie always keeps a bunch for me in the fridge. “So, how come you’ve not been yourself lately? What happened to the Annabelle that was one of the top-ranked goalies in the state?” Sophie asks, reaching for an oatmeal raisin cookie. “I guess today wasn’t... really my day,” I reply quietly. Both Ellie and Sophie look at me with what seemed like concern. “What?” I ask.

“We know something’s wrong. Let me guess, flashbacks and insecurities getting to you again?” Sophie asks. “See, I told you I was closer with her!”

“Yeah,” I quietly respond. I’m ready to cry again. “Here’s some advice,” Ellie suggests. Oh boy, let’s see how great this is going to be. Her advice has never worked in the past, so that’s why I’m a little nervous.

Then Ellie says, “You just have to open up to your stepmom, that’s all.” THAT’S ALL? I start yelling, “ELLIE, YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND, OKAY?!” and stomp out back to my own house.

I felt so bad after that. I was afraid to go to school, so I tried to fake a stomach bug. That excuse unfortunately didn’t fly with my new “mom.” This meant me and my best friend now had to AVOID each other for the first time at school.

More rumors? I hope not! We actually didn’t avoid each other though. Instead, Ellie apologized to me by saying, “Look, I’m sorry for not understanding your pain, Anna. Can I... at least try to help?” I had to think about that one for a deep moment. It was either lose another great friend like the million others you lost in the past or let her help you even if this doesn’t work.

I eventually said, “Look, I forgive you. I shouldn’t have acted like that. I’ve just been going through a lot lately, and it made me feel worthless that I yelled at my best friend for absolutely no reason.” That was honestly the best thing I’ve ever said in a while, but then she said, “Come on now, I know you didn’t mean it. That’s not the Anna I know. We’ll come up with a game plan, okay? Meet me at 4pm, after school, my house.” Uh, oh. Let’s hope this works.

It's now 4pm, and I'm practically sprinting to Ellie's house. Thankfully, I live 2 blocks away from her, but I felt bad for missing the soccer team pizza party. Oh well, that's all behind me now (literally, she lives right in front of Mitchell Park).

Anyway, when I get to her house, her dog Coco is standing right in front of the stairs. Ellie almost trips while going down those same stairs. "Hey, Anna!" she excitedly says. "Please come in." Here goes nothing. We walk up to Ellie's room. It is so colorful and has such good vibes! "So, what is your game plan like?" I ask. Ellie responds, "Just speak." I was confused when she said that. "Just speak? That's it?!" I knew it wasn't going to work. "Yeah, just speak. I do it with my mother all the time," she explains.

"But how?" I ask. Yes, I know it sounds weird, but speaking to people I don't trust makes me nervous. I simply have trust issues- especially after everything that happened last year. "Maybe you should try writing out what you want to say first. Then, when the time is right, you should schedule a time for just you and Jessica to speak. Huh; maybe this might work.

All I have to do is build up confidence! Simple!

Not simple. It's now two weeks after we came up with this game plan, and now we had to prepare. Both of our families are going out to dinner together at Windsor Station Restaurant & Barroom (yum!), and I'm kind of excited! I was supposed to talk to Jessica alone, but everyone else is just tagging along for fine dining (and maybe some entertainment). Way better than a lousy pizza joint in my opinion, Ellie!

"Okay, now that we're dressed, it's time to practice!" Ellie says with a smile on her face. She brings Coco, her dog, in for some reason. "Um, Coco's not going with us," I say. "Yeah, I know," Ellie responds. "Just pretend she's Jessica." She puts Coco down and waits patiently. "Go on," she suggests. "It'll help you I promise." I'm terrified now. I can't even trust ANIMALS anymore! Then, I look at the time. It's 5:30! Oh no, I think to myself. The doorbell rings loudly and Coco starts barking uncontrollably. "I feel like I'm going to throw up!" I whisper to Ellie. She hands me her mini waste basket. "Hey girls, our ride is her- ANNA!" Sophie exclaims. I ended up puking after all. Sophie rushes to get my parents and sister. This isn't going to end well.

They enter the room with worry on their faces. "Anna, you okay honey?" Jessica asks. I just start crying into the waste basket. Amelia starts to slowly tiptoe out of the room. "This is... so embarrassing," she mutters under her breath. Last time I checked, I'm in a worse situation than you are, you little- phew, I should stop before I get in trouble.

I remove my head from the waste basket and start to feel disoriented. I might as well just pass out again. But I don't. Instead, Jessica gives me a hug. "Anna, why didn't you tell me what was happening before?" she asks. Wait a minute- how did she know?

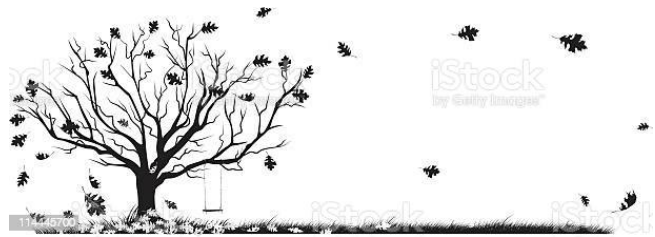
Apparently, she and Sophie have been talking over the phone. I found out once we got to the restaurant. I sigh. "Look, I knew I should've trusted you from the beginning. I'm not used to having you in my life yet, and as your new stepdaughter, I should respect the fact that you are my new mom," I say to Jessica. She smiles and says, "I understand, okay? But I'd like to be one of the first people you think of when you feel this way, okay? It's important."

We laugh for some reason. But we're not laughing at her, we're not laughing at her, we're laughing with her. All in all, I learned one important lesson that night- to open up... simply speak.

There is Always Hope

The girl slowly reaches out for what
she's lost,
All the love that comes at a cost,
She worries about being perfect,
She feels misunderstood,
She's always underfoot,
In the way,
Hoping for tomorrow to be a better
day,
She mistaken as someone who
should know better,
She's underestimated as someone
who doesn't know what's right for
her,
She's looking for a way to win,
She's looking for hope,
A way to escape,
A way to say nope,
She want to tell the voices in her
head to stop,
She lets them tell her what to do in-
stead,
She wants to be free of her bur-
dens,
To be a human
And yet,
There is always hope.

-Norah Nielson



A Note from an Introvert

Leave me alone in a room.
My book, blanket, and soul is all that I need.
Leave me, and allow me to sit with myself.
I want my mind to soar,
I want to become so conscious of my daydreams
That it feels as though I am there
somewhere else.
Perhaps sitting on a cool rock, covered in mossy green, a mas-
sive oak standing confidently,
Fluttering its leaves to produce a light breeze,
Allow me to ponder my many curiosities
alone.
I would prefer to live in solitude.
I want to be at peace with myself.
Do not tell me that I must speak,
because sometimes I need to sit, and I need to think.
Do not tell me that I am objectionable,
because in an uproarious world,
I need distance.
Allow me to be.

-Ariel Yarmus

All Because of a Hat

By Marlys Swinger

**1st Place winner in the Great American Tall Tales Short Story Writing Contest
Teen/Adult Category**

My class visited an American history museum after completing our studies of the 1800s. I lagged far behind the group, unable to tear myself away from the statue of a woman, rifle in hand, and the name “Annie Oakley” under her feet. Ever since my class studied her era and career, Annie has been my adored hero and example of spunk. When I was sure no one could see me, I silently slipped the wide-brimmed cowboy hat off the statue’s head and placed it on my own just for a moment, as I thought. I crept to an ornate turn-of-the-century mirror and peeped at my reflection in the misted glass. A blinding flash, a tingling sensation, and I blacked out on the floor.

I heard a stallion scream above me and managed to drag myself out of the way before the plunging hooves came down where my head had just been.

“Watch it, what do you think you’re doing here? This is no place for a child!” yelled the man leading the stallion.

I hung onto a nearby fence rail and blinked the dust from my eyes. Was this really happening to me? I thought time-travel belonged in the over-active imaginations of science fiction writers. Concluding that it was more likely I had just fallen asleep on a museum bench and was having an exceptionally vivid dream, I decided to go along with the plot for the present.

After a short look around, I realized that I was in a bustling show train busy preparing for the evening show. I followed the surge of the crowd toward the grandstands, and paid for a seat near the back. A man sitting in the next seat politely introduced himself as Friendly Fred. Several times during the show I caught him looking suspiciously at me; I, however, soon forgot about him in the excitement of the show. Was I dreaming, or was that really my hero in the ring, performing astounding feats of skill?

Eventually I realized it was not at me the man was staring, but my hat. Growing uncomfortable under his steady gaze, I took it off to see what was so unusual about it. It was tan with a small red star on the turned-up brim, but it had a sort of glow that I had never seen in a hat before.

As Annie fired another bull’s eye, the man jumped up and yelled, “See that?” Then, snatching my hat, he disappeared between the bleachers.

That performance made me realize there must be something valuable about my hat. Why else would Friendly Fred steal it? Thinking hard about the situation, I concluded that the hat must have the power to transport you through time when worn by someone who could see their reflection. But had I really fallen for the classic trick which the man used? Without the hat, I could never return to my own era, would never see my family again, would be trapped in the past forever! I decided not to waste one moment, but to begin pursuing Friendly Fred immediately.

Walking through town to gather some supplies for my journey, I saw a notice tacked to a clapboard wall. It told about a bank robbery which had occurred recently, and offered a reward for the criminal, name of Jesse James. Additionally, it said that the thief was a stagecoach robber. I always loved playing detective, and when was a better chance than now? Maybe chasing one villain would lead me to the other. Who could tell?

I figured that the best way to catch up with the stagecoach robber was to make an appearance in the forest where he was boldest. So I hired a stagecoach, and we set out for the Forbidden Forest where the notice said Jesse James and his gang had a hideout.

No one rode with me inside; only the coachman, who was nearly hysterical at the thought of setting foot in the forest, sat on the box in front. This gave me time to plan my next move if Jesse James and his gang attacked. Soon becoming aware of the silence, I pushed aside the curtain to look at the forest. No bird

sang, no leaves rustled, no twig cracked, nor was there a breath of wind. The trees made a thick canopy, so the light was dim and greenish. Taking note of the huge boulders by the roadside, I expected the attack any minute.

However, I was still shocked and frightened when a bullet broke the window above my head and four men leapt from behind the boulders I had just seen. The coachman managed to escape into the forest. I was alone. I couldn't put up a fight since it was four to one; anyway, I didn't want to escape. I wanted to recover the bank money, and the only way to do that was to go with them. That's why I came to the forest in the first place: to be captured by Jesse James and his gang. After the bound and gagged me, they set off for an unknown destination. The ride gave me time to think: what if they killed me before I could get any information? I thought it was money and valuables they wanted, not people.

I must have fallen into a fitful sleep, because I don't know how much later we arrived at a deep canyon, with rocky cliffs so high they made me dizzy simply to look at. I did not realize why we were here until one man yelled, "What are you waiting for? You know why we're here! Now jump!"

This was the end. This dream was going too far. Or was I still dreaming? I'd find out soon enough. Going to the edge, I looked over as if in a daze. I must have fainted, because the next thing I knew I was tumbling into a prickly branch which bent and dropped me roughly on a large ledge of rock. I was pretty badly scratched from the branch, bruised from the landing, and winded from the fall, but otherwise feeling very lucky to be alive. But there almost certainly was no way up or down the cliff, so I sat down to think. Figuring that the less time wasted the better, I set out to look for a way up. Jesse James and his gang had most likely left, thinking I was dead. Anyway, who could survive a fall like that without my luck?

I began exploring the face of the cliff, searching for handholds. Moving a rock aside, I discovered a large hole. Now, how could there be a hole halfway up a cliff in the middle of nowhere? Surely no creature could survive here. As it looked like my only means of escape, I decided to follow it as far as it would lead me. At least I would try; there was nothing to lose.

Although it was hard to see at first, my eyes gradually became accustomed to the darkness enough to see that I was in a large sloping tunnel, with stalactites growing from the ceiling, water dripping off their tips onto my nose. Never had I seen such a creepy place, but it was my only chance of survival, so I took it.

Eventually the tunnel became wider and taller, with many rooms and caverns. The darkness seemed to melt as I went further, replaced by a strange flickering light. Where could the light come from, here underground? Coming into the largest room yet, I could see where it came from: a burning torch propped in a wooden bracket hung on the wall, and all around the room stood chests filled with treasures, the like of which I had never seen. Kneeling before the nearest chest, I examined the lid, searching for clues as to who owned this vast amount of riches. As my hand moved over the smooth wood, it caught a groove and ran along it. Looking more closely, I made out the initials "JJ". Quickly I found the letters on all the other chests. It couldn't be, but it was: Jesse James! I was on his trail again!

Then I heard a faint echoing sound from somewhere in the cavern. It was unmistakably a voice, so I crept toward the sound to eavesdrop for any helpful information. I did not know how helpful it would prove to be.

There was torchlight dancing from within... and voices rising with excitement as I drew near. One voice grew louder than the others, saying, "Ha! I've finally got this hat! I don't suppose you know what that means, boys?"

I listened in absolute astonishment as there came a chorus of "No's".

"Well, if I put this hat on and look at my reflection, I can be transported to a different era! Now, listen to my plan: if I could steal valuables in another era and bring them back with me through time, no-

body could catch me or turn me in because they are unable to follow me without the hat! We'll be rich, boys!"

I could not believe my ears. Could this really be the same man who stole the hat? The one who called himself Friendly Fred?! If that was the case, it certainly made my job a lot easier! Instead of two dangerous criminals to face, I was dealing with one, treacherous as he was. But he had the hat! I just had to prevent him from going, one way or another. Then came the worst.

"I'm going, boys! See you when I got the loot!"

I had to do something, and fast. Without even thinking, I grabbed a small rock, stepped into the gang's hideout, and looked around for the mirror. I was just in time: Jesse James was putting on the hat and stepping toward it. Acting quickly, I threw the rock at the mirror, which instantly splintered.

The gang watched, awestruck. Then with a roar they bore down on me, and I scampered into the tunnel like a rabbit. Trapped between the precipice and them, I was doomed, unless...

Reaching the entrance to the tunnel on the cliff face, I stepped to the side of the hole. I could hear the men blundering after me down the tunnel. Apparently they did not know the back entrance to their hideout, for one after the other they stumbled out and hurtled over the edge to their death. Except for one: Jesse James, still wearing the hat.

As we stood there, there came a rumbling, and a skinny crack opened under our feet. I jumped to the side, but Jesse James was swallowed up. The hat, too wide-brimmed to fall down the crack, got wedged between two rocks just inside it. Quickly retrieving it, I decided to get out of this dangerous place post-haste; but how?

The only way was through the caves, because the robbers must have gotten there somehow. I set out down the tunnel again. Reaching the cavern with the treasure, I became aware of flickering torches and shouting. Before I knew it, they were upon me: a mob of goblins, hideous creatures, all chanting, "Death to the one who fought us and took our treasure cave! Death, death!"

Evidently they thought I was the thief. Well, I would do my best to defend myself. I managed to scream loud enough to catch their attention, then told them what had just happened to the real culprit. A completely different attitude swept over the mob like a wave. They were overjoyed, and told me that they were miners, and their blasting for gold had caused the small earthquake that had caused the demise of Jesse James. Then I officially returned to them their treasure cave and the stolen money, except the bank money and one large gold coin, which I tied in the corner of my handkerchief.

Finding the entrance was easy: I simply followed the only tunnel leading upwards, till it ended in a ladder with a trapdoor at the top. I pushed on the door, which swung open, and I could see that the top was covered with grassy turf. When it closed behind me, it blended in cleverly with the surrounding meadow.

I started wondering how to get back to town; that's when I saw the stagecoach and horses, and realized that I was on the cliff again. Thankfully I love horse-cart riding, so I didn't find driving the stagecoach too difficult.

On reaching town, I went straight to the bank and handed in the money, telling the managers that the thief was dead.

Now that my jobs were done, it was time to go home. I found a quiet spot and pulled out the coin, polishing it with my handkerchief. Then I put on the hat and looked into the coin's shiny face.

Everything happened the same as before, the flash, the tingling sensation, and the blackout. This time I woke up to the teacher calling my name, and Annie Oakley's hatless statue looming above me. Quickly I put the hat back on her head, and stumbled dazedly to meet my teacher.

"I know everything is very interesting, but please try to keep up with the class," she said.

Later at home, I took out my handkerchief and noticed a knot in the corner. As I untied it, something clattered to the floor. It was the coin.



Photo of Annie Oakley by Charles Stacy, 1894

Never Meant To Be

a Light Sparks,
it Dies Out,
it comes Back to Life,
then Flickers Out...

Maybe
It
Was
Never
Meant
To
Be

-Norah Nielson

Animals Alone

The Magic of Them
Peaceful... serene... quiet...
still...
Animals... Alone...



Norah Nielson

Crash Down Around You

The Calm Seas,
The Raging Oceans,
The Water Rushing,
Floating Across The Beach,
The Sound Of The Waves
Crashing Together,
The Taste Of The Salty Sea
Air,
The Sea Breeze,

As
The
Waves
Crash
Down
Around
You

-Norah Nielson



American Tale Tales Writing Contest 2020

By Madilyn Becker

2nd Place Winner in Teen/Adult Category

Charlie Smith was just a regular girl when she left for a road trip that would change her life. She had always loved the mountains as a little girl. She left Sunday morning for what she thought would be a normal, fun road trip. It turned out to be the opposite of that.

Charlie left her house with an odd feeling but convinced herself it was fine and she was probably just nervous for the drive. As she drove out of her driveway, she waved goodbye to her house, not knowing what was about to happen.

About an hour into her drive, she heard strange noises coming from her car. She didn't know much about cars, but she jumped out, hoping she could fix it. Charlie opened the hood of the car and a big, thick cloud of smoke flew out of the engine. She knew she had no idea how to fix that. Charlie figured she couldn't be far from the hotel where she was staying, and that someone there could help with her car.

She walked for a while, and finally came to her hotel. "It looks like a castle!" Charlie thought to herself. She walked in to be greeted by a nice old man at the front desk. "Welcome to Mohonk Mountain House!" he exclaimed. Charlie thanked him and asked where her room was. "Follow me," the man said.

On the way to room 203, the room where Charlie would be staying, she noticed all kinds of old paintings hanging and hand carved faces in the walls. "This beautiful place was built in 1869", the man told Charlie as they walked down a very long hallway. She noticed he had the bluest eyes she'd ever see. They almost didn't look like human eyes, more like a dragon or some kind of made of creature.

He soon opened a heavy, thick wooden door. Charlie saw a room covered in wallpaper. At closer look, she realized the wallpaper had little pink birds and purple flowers all over it. The old man told Charlie this was her room, she was a little shocked that she would have to stay in a room with the craziest wallpaper, but she didn't complain.

Before she could ask the nice man for someone to look at the car, he rushed out of the room. Charlie heard the door click as it closed. She looked out her window and saw a beautiful old statue. She found an information packet on the night stand by the bed that told her all about it, and other statues at Mohonk. The statue she saw was called Sky Top Tower; it was Mohonk's signature landmark. Charlie noticed a green shining object on the top of it. Without giving it much thought, she turned away from the window and went to open her door. The door was locked.

That old man had locked her in here!

"Help!!" Charlie called. "Help, I'm locked in!!"

A few moments later, a woman unlocked the door. She looked to be a chef. "How'd she hear me from all the way downstairs where the kitchen was? I'm on the third floor." Charlie thought. Before she could say anything though, the chef introduced herself as Marlee. She left without another word.

Charlie did think that was a little odd, but convinced herself she was just very busy cooking all the wonderful food she smelled. Charlie ran downstairs to the dining area. Everything smelled amazing. "Marlee must be a great chef", Charlie thought. The food was great! Very full, Charlie returned to her room. She noticed the beautiful wood stair railings on her way up. They looked hand carved, just like the mantle on the fireplace she passed on her way out of the dining room.

Once back in her room, Charlie looked out her window again to see the green, shiny object on top of Sky Top Tower gone! She found this weird but didn't think about it too much before lying down and turning off the lamp in her room. She was very tired and thought some sleep would be good. "In the morning, I'll be rested and I can find someone to fix my car", she thought.

A few hours later Charlie was woken up by the terrible sounds of birds fighting. Before she could even turn over to turn on the lamp, a pink bird landed on her! Then she noticed more birds were flying off her wallpaper, she screamed. She screamed so loud, she was sure everyone in Mohonk heard.

Marlee appeared at her door almost instantly. It was so quick; it seemed like she teleported there. Now, Charlie wouldn't even question that. When Charlie let her in, she scooped up the birds with her chef hat, and ran out. Charlie was now very awake, so she decided to follow Marlee down the hallway. Before she could get far, faces in the walls starting yelling at her! "Go back!" they screamed. Charlie kept chasing Marlee though. She had to know what was going on.

As they ran past the fireplace Charlie had passed the day before, a big blue dragon came out! Charlie screamed but Marlee and the other people staying in the hotel, who were now watching, paid no attention. "This can't be a normal thing that happens!" Charlie yelled. One of the other people answered. "No, it is." They seemed almost confused that Charlie was scared of the dragon. "Oh come on!" Charlie yelled. This place was far from a normal hotel.

She figured it was haunted because of how old it was. "Maybe Marlee and that nice old man are ghosts!" she thought. That's when she realized the dragon's beautiful blue eyes. They were the same eyes that the old man had! "No!" Charlie yelled. This couldn't be real. She knew it was real, however, when the dragon hit her with his giant tail. Before she had time to react, Marlee came running around the corner, still holding the pink birds that came out of her wallpaper.

"Don't bring those monsters near me!" Charlie yelled. Marlee quickly opened the window and let the birds fly out. Charlie didn't see much of this though. She was busy watching a painting that came alive! It was the portrait of Albert K. Smiley, the founder of Mohonk Mountain House. He jumped out of the painting and started to force the dragon, or the old man who had become a dragon, back into the fireplace!

Soon, Marlee came over to the fireplace. She started to ask Charlie about why she stole the gemstone. "What gemstone?" Charlie asked her. Marlee explained the gemstone they keep on Sky Top Tower. "It controls the magic here!" she yelled. Charlie remembered that shiny object she had seen there from her window, and how it was gone after she had dinner.

"I saw it from my window, but I didn't take it!" Charlie yelled. Marlee didn't seem convinced. "Then why did my birds attack you? They only attack when they know someone has stolen the gem." she told Charlie. "That was why the wallpaper birds attacked me?" she thought. Charlie stuttered, trying to find an answer for Marlee. Albert Smiley, who had come out of his portrait, stood there and watched. He looked so human like. This whole place was starting to creep Charlie out. What if Marlee had come out of a painting too?

Marlee started yelling. "Stop lying! We found the Sky Top Tower gem in your night stand!". "When it's stolen, the magic in here starts happening! You wanted to see all this didn't you?" Marlee continued. Now Charlie knew someone had framed her. Who could it have been?

A second later, the man who had turned into a dragon came walking around the corner. "Okay, he's back to a human again. Maybe somebody returned the gem." Charlie thought. Marlee started to yell at him but Charlie couldn't take anymore. She didn't want to see what would happen next. She was able to sneak out of the hallway and out to one of Mohonk's beautiful gardens.

Charlie tried for hours to figure everything out but she just couldn't. "Maybe it's meant to be a mystery." She thought. Charlie noticed the lake just a little bit away. She decided to take a walk. Maybe a walk and sitting by the calm lake would help her feel calm.

She noticed the man who was talking to Marlee come outside. She thought she heard him call her name. Even if he did, she didn't want to deal with anything else right now. She kept walking. "Wait!" yelled the man. Charlie had gone behind a patch of trees.

"Come back! I fixed your car!" he yelled. "Charlie?!" he screamed as he walked towards the lake. Once he reached the lake, Charlie was nowhere to be seen. He looked everywhere. He turned around to see the gemstone back on top of Sky Top Tower. Charlie, however, was never seen again.

CONFIDENCE

By Jackie Rivera

Cannot allow outside forces to influence my self-image.

Overwhelming thoughts need to leave.

Nobody's ever going to be perfect.

Focus on the better things in life.

I am a wonderful individual.

Don't let fake photos bring you down.

Every day is a good day.

No photos online can be trusted.

Cannot get down on myself for every little thing.

Everyone has moments of insecurity.

My Dogs Best Friend

By Steve Liss

3rd Place winner in the American Tall Tale Writing Contest 2020

It was difficult to say how long the two had been slogging uphill towards the base of the cliff. Edibles tended to do that, and Kevin found himself in a backwater eddy of thought, while the slow progress they were making uphill was mirrored by the slow absorption of the gummy bears he had ingested.

He turned to Annie.

Annie, I keep getting higher.

Like you said, that's the way edibles are.

Kevin leaned over and scratched her behind the ears.

You and me, we have a good relationship, right Annie girl?

Kevin, for the one-hundredth time, stop talking to me like I'm a person. I'm a dog.

I don't talk and I don't think!

Kevin thought he could reason with her on this point.

If that were true, then what are we doing right now?

You are writing a story, and a short one at that.

Is that a fact! Next thing, you're gonna' to tell me is I'm a figment of my own imagination, that I'm not even real.

Kevin reached over and stroked her back from her head to her tail, than raised his hand and stared at his palm.

She looked up at Kevin ...

That's not at all what I'm saying. Look, it's really not a good time to be talking about this. Trust me.

You're right. Just look at those leaves. The underside of them, when the wind flips them over, they're a different shade of green than the topside ... I never really noticed that before ...or if I did, I never noticed it.

Annie laughed. Just don't try to write anything.

Hey, do you remember that story I told you the other day, not to change the subject.

Which one, replied Annie.

The one about Mrs. Lindburgh, my seventh grade biology teacher. Vinnie's had that photo of her photo of her at the beach wearing a two-piece bathing suite. You mean the teacher who always wore a charm bracelet with the five silhouettes of her kids hanging off it?

Yeah, so all the boys knew she did it at least five times.

That was a great story. Of course I remember it.

Ya wanna know how Vinnie really got that photo. It's a really interesting story.

Tell me, responded Annie.

He found it under the seat of his father's car.

He used to sit in it and play pretend on the driveway all the time. So one day he was crawling around on the floor, pretending he was ducking fire from enemy planes, and he found the picture under the seat.

So you mean it was his father who took the picture, she asked.

Yeah.

Did his dad know she was Vinnie's biology teacher?

Definitely. He met her during Open School Week.

So...

Well for starters, Kevin began, the photo wasn't taken at the beach.

Then where was it taken?

In a hotel room.

A hotel room! Annie responded.

Yeah, and it wasn't a bathing suit.

Annie stared at Kevin, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It was her underwear, he continued, she was standing next to the bed, looking all sexy, dangling her bra from one hand.

What was Vinnie's dad wearing?

How the hell do I know? Do you want to hear the rest of the story or not?

Sorry, please continue, said Annie

Ok... so Vinnie's dad must have been screwing his son's biology teacher.

How do you know all this?

I'm telling you, just listen and stop interrupting.

Vinnie and I went to the same High School. We met at a reunion and were reminiscing about how all the boys had the hots for Mrs. Lindburgh. So I asked him if he remembered the photo that he used to charge 10¢ to see.

And Vinnie tells me this story ...

One of the last times he saw his father was at a nursing home, he had emphysema, and his father brought up the subject of how Vinnie used to play fighter pilot in his car on the driveway.

So Vinnie tells his dad about the photo he found under the seat. He says he knew he should have just left it where he found it, but you know, his father was dying, so he decides to tell him the truth.

His father couldn't believe it at first, continued Kevin, but Vinnie described the photo in mildly graphic detail, you know, because his father also had congestive heart failure and he didn't want to get him all excited.

So his father bursts out laughing, and in between laughing and coughing he tells Vinnie he was always sure his wife must have found it. He tells Vinnie he made a solemn promise to God that day, that he would never cheat again, and prayed that his wife wouldn't leave him. He credits that solemn vow as the reason his wife never brought it up, even during their worst fights.

'I can't believe, said his father, coughing and laughing at the same time, that I gave up all those women and cute waitresses for all those years ... for nothing!'

They both cracked up.

Vinnie told me he hadn't seen his father laugh like that since he went to hospice.

His father died the following week.

Where's the photo now? Asked Annie.

Vinnie still has it.

Did you see it?

No, he didn't have it with him.

Wow... that's a good one, Annie said. Thanks for sharing.

Kevin shook his head, 'thanks for sharing' huh! You're gonna tell me a dog is capable of language like that?

But before she could respond she jumped up, started barking and chased a squirrel up a tree.

They continued hiking and talking all the way to the base of the cliff and then along the trail that runs underneath.

Kevin stopped abruptly, took off his backpack and removed an insulated lunch bag.

This is where we we're headed, this wide vertical crack. What a view, I just love this place. Let's eat.

Annie cocked her head sideways and thought to herself 'wide vertical crack ... lets eat.' He couldn't possibly be making this up. Does the name Freud mean anything to you, she asked, tongue in cheek.

Of course I know who Freud is, why do you ask?

Never mind.

Annie walked over to the cooler bag and began sniffing.

Water now, she said, panting like a dog.

After a long drink and a refill, she turned to Kevin.

So how many guys do you think Mrs. Lindburgh was screwing around with?

Didn't you say she once returned from a hallway meeting with Mr. Hammer, the gym teacher, with a chalk handprint on her ass?

You remember that!

Of course I do.

Do you think she ever made it with any of her students?

Annie, you are reading my mind. Absent Mr. Barella, that was one of my earliest fantasies when I first started to ...

Stop! Exclaimed Annie, I don't need to hear this. I do have one more question

though.

What?

Do you think she knows a dog she could hook me up with?

They both cracked up.

Kevin looked at Annie and couldn't stop smiling; he had to admit it would make a really interesting subplot, so he asked one more question of her.

So what kind of dog did you have in mind?

Pekingese. I always wanted to make it with a Pekingese; I love that big furry halo that covers them.

Kevin opened a can of dog food and stuck a small carrot in it.

Annie looked at the carrot sticking straight up from the can.

She ate the carrot first, after reassuring herself that sometimes a carrot is just a carrot, and then finished off the can.

Kevin unwrapped his peanut butter and banana sandwich, took the first bite and watched the leaves flittering in the breeze as they changed color before his eyes.

It was mostly a silent meal. Annie finished first, lay down and dozed off.

Kevin used his alone time to try and figure out about his marriage. Was it doomed from the start or did it ever have a chance? High School romances rarely last. But the question he thought about most was if getting married so young caused the divorce, or if getting married young, then getting divorced ten years later were in fact two unrelated events.

Unable to be sure of how it all went down, he stretched out and fell asleep along side Annie.

The End

Dear Librarian Tall Tale Writing Contest for Children

1st Place Winner

Sophie Meier

Dear library,

I could not return my book on time because I had too much time to return it. That's right, time went backward with me and my sister and my book of course. You're probably wondering just how I came to be so crazy so I'd better explain.

Yesterday was sunny and pleasant, perfect for chilling with a book in our treehouse. I didn't intend to bring my younger sister, but all sisters are like puppy dog tails so she followed and soon we were both happily reading the book I had brought. She chattered like a jay and pointed at the pictures in an irritating way, so I told her to shut up. At this, she began to do all she possibly could to annoy me. The book I was reading was a volume of world history, and knowing full well that I had just studied the Ice Age and was sick of it, she made a great show of pointing to what I thought was a stupid picture of a man from the ice age in the book. "Look, a cool person from the ice age! I wish we could go there!"

"That's enough" I snapped. Furiously I tried to grab the book, but was halted by an eerie whistling sound outside the window. I spun around and the tree house also spun around, lifted from the tree tops, and – I found myself unable to see I as spinning so fast. After what seemed ages, it finally slowed to a stop and we collapsed dizzy onto the floor, groaning. "That was exactly like Jack and Annie in 'The Magic Tree-house'. Where are we?" my sister asked. I moved to the window of the tree house and stared down, right into the face of something that looked like a cross between a man and an ape! I screamed, dashed from the window, and promptly collided with my sister. "What's your problem?" she snapped. "Go see for yourself!" I told her. She went to the window and looked out. "I don't see anything" she said, "I think you've gone cuckoo." "Are you crazy? There's some kind of ice ape outside, and we're in the Ice Age!" I yelled. She looked out the window again. "Oh wow, it does look like we're in the Ice Age, look at all that snow and ice. But I still don't see any ice ape. Come on, let's go explore."

She seized one of the curtains, wrapped herself in it for warmth, and climbed out. I did the same and soon we stood in the midst of a snowy forest. "What's that?" my sister hissed. We both froze and listened. Far off, rhythmical beating of rocks could be heard. "No more noise" I whispered. We quietly followed the sound closer and closer until we peeked through the bushes to see a bunch of caves with – oh no – not just one but at least ten ice age people sitting around a fire, pounding stones! "I'm going closer, I want to get a better look at them" said my sister, stubbornly yanking me closer and suddenly we were in full sight. One of the ice apes saw us and grunted something incomprehensible to the others. All of them turned to look, and two stood up and began waddling towards us. Grabbing our arms, they began to pull us towards the fire. I protested as they prodded us and one of them grabbed my now very much

overdue library book from my hands and held it over the fire. In a flash of desperation, I seized my book, yanked my sister from their hands, and we made a dash for the woods!

We ran for what seemed miles and finally collapsed in the snow, breathing hard. "It doesn't look like they've followed us" said my sister, looking back. "How weird was that?" "Well, the main thing is I managed to get that book back. I have to bring it back to the library, no matter what." My sister groaned. "Forget the stupid book. It will be a miracle if we get ourselves out of here at all. How will we ever find our way back to the treehouse without them seeing us?" "Well we have to at least try" I said and we headed off in what we thought was the right direction.

After reaching the point where even I felt tired, we again plopped in the snow, discouraged. Suddenly my sister straightened up, listening. "Now what's up?" I said sarcastically. "First you lead me to some ice apes - so what are we going to meet next, a monster?" "It IS a monster!" she hissed. "What??? That's not possible!" "Look through the trees you blind bat!" she shrieked. Fearfully I peered through the bushes, hoping her eyes and ears had problems. But no such luck. Fifteen feet away sat a monster in the snow, munching rocks with long yellow teeth. It was about three times the size of a human with long black shaggy hair and glowing yellow eyes. At my sister's shriek, it saw us and standing up, started to lumber toward us. My sister took one look at the frightful creature approaching, screamed again, seized my arm, and fled. "Stop, stop, I dropped my book!" I yelled. "Just leave it!" my sister shouted. "NO!" Breaking free, I dashed back, trying not to look at the fearsome creature's long claws as it approached closer and closer. Oh no! Figures the book was exactly the same color as the gray mossy boulders the monster had been eating. The creature grunted and bent over to pick up the book. I froze, not knowing whether to run or try a desperate rescue. The monster opened up his gigantic mouth to eat my library book.

Just at that moment, there was a blinding flash! The monster and I froze and a tremendous thud shook the hill we were on and I fell to the ground, dazed. My sister, however, sprang in to action. She leapt up and dragged me under a nearby stone overhanging, and not second too soon, as huge rocks began to fall all around us. "Gosh, what was that, comet Neowise?" I said rubbing the bruises caused by bouncing behind my sister. "Of course not silly, Neowise is in the future. If I were you, I'd be thanking me for saving my life." "You were the person who freaked out and deserted the book" I retorted. "Why are you still so concerned about that book?" she said. "You used a picture in it to bring us here, like in 'The Magic Treehouse', didn't you? What if that is the only way to get back? So we better go find out what happened to the monster and if he really ate my book." My sister jumped about a foot in the air. "Is...is...he still... alive?" "Who knows, but we need to find out" I replied.

We ventured cautiously out of the cave. The hideous brute lay stretched out on the ground a short distance away. "Where do you think your precious book is, in its stomach?" my sister asked. "Oh, my gosh, I have no clue - oh thank goodness, there it is! It rolled down the hill!" I went and retrieved the now battered book. "What do you think the librarians will say about it now?" I groaned, holding it up. My sister didn't answer and we stood in the snow, wondering what to do next. Finally, she said, "Well, we better get a move on. For all we know we're being followed." "Great idea but where's the treehouse?" I snapped. "Very simple" she said, "all we have to do is climb to the top of this hill. We should be able to see it from up there."

Luckily my sister was right. From the top of the hill, we spotted the treehouse off in the distance. We set off and after half an hour we were there and stood in the deep snow at the foot of the tree. “You go first” my sister said and pushed me towards the ladder. “All right scaredy cat” I said and climbed up. Phew! Everything was exactly the same as we had left it. “It’s totally fine, come on up.” Once inside the treehouse, we shucked off the heavy curtains we’d wrapped ourselves with and hung them up again. “I was super freaked out by the comet” I said. “Who wasn’t?” my sister replied. “The monster at least died before he could eat your book. No matter what you say, I still think the ice-apes were hilarious.” “They could have been until they just about burnt my book” I protested.

“Where is the book?” my sister asked sharply. “Calm down, it’s right here” I said, holding it up. “Well give it here, I want to go home.” “So do I” I replied, for once agreeing with her. “Ok, this is how it works” she said. “According to the Magic Treehouse Books, all I have to do is find a picture of New York, point at it and say, ‘I want to go there.’” “Well, I sure hope that works” I said. My sister flipped through the pages, searching. “Guess what, we’re in luck!” she said, showing me a photo of our home state. “You ready?” “Sure am,” I replied. “Well then, here goes – I want to go there” she said, pointing. We waited. “It’s not working...” she began and then, wheeeee came the whistling and the treehouse began to spin faster and faster!

After what seemed like ages, the spinning slowed and finally came to a stop. I opened my eyes, hardly daring to hope. Yay! Looking out the window, we were home! “Whoopee!” I yelled and literally fell down the ladder to the ground. “Here dunderhead” my sister called from above, “you forgot your precious book.” She tossed it down and I caught it with both hands and dashed to our front door.

So dear librarian, I hope you will accept this long explanation as the truth. (I know that my explanation wasn’t supposed to be longer than 800 words but it was simply impossible to tell everything that happened that quickly!) At this moment you may be wondering if I’m completely crazy, and how you can help me get to a brain doctor. But I assure you that I am quite ok, and I promise you that I’ve never lied or exaggerated in my entire life. So once again, I’m very sorry for the delay, and I promise I will never be late returning a library book again after this incredible, amazing and totally astounding adventure!

Sincerely,

Sophie Anne Meier



Dear Librarian Tall Tale Writing Contest 2020

2nd Place Winner

Meghan Hofer

Dear Librarians,

I could not return my book on time because of an unbelievable episode that took place the day after I signed it out of the library.

I was lying in my hammock, reading my book, when my pet penguin brought my little sister's toy rocket ship, which she had named Edna, and dropped it on my lap before waddling away. Several minutes later, just as I was reaching the best part of my book, the small toy began to jiggle in my lap. As I picked it up to examine it, the tiny object began to rise.

My shocked fingers released their grip, and old Edna rose higher. I stared at her in awe. Suddenly, I leaped into the air, still clutching the book. My jump carried me a full three feet into the air, and my fingers closed around the rocket ship. However, it was as if my weight made no difference. Edna continued to rise slowly, still carrying me and the book. As we rose above the treetops, our speed increased steadily until we were cruising skyward at a pace never before exceeded by any other man-made contraption.

A few moments later, I realized I could not breathe. I looked up at Edna, who showed no signs of slowing or turning. Before my eyes, a hatch in the rocket ship opened. Inside was a neatly folded mask. As I pulled it out, I noticed Edna's lights flashing in a familiar fashion. Recognizing the rhythmic flash, I remembered a class I took in fourth grade called Communication. Then it came to me – Edna was sending me a message in code. After I had taken in this phenomenon, I began to read the dots and dashes: put it on – put it on. Weak from lack of oxygen, I struggled to put it on. When the mask was finally secured around my ears, and over my nose and mouth, I found – to my relief – that I could breathe again.

We continued our ascent, breaking through the earth's atmosphere. I could now see our destination – a single rock in Saturn's whirling ring. Closer and closer we came. I could see the swirly rock distinctly. Edna was finally slowing down. At last we were there, my feet dangling above the rock, which had mysteriously stopped moving. The rocket ship slowly descended the last few inches, and my feet came to rest. I breathed a deep sigh of relief. I was alive.

When I came to my senses and thought over my dramatic situation, I began to wonder if I was dreaming and immediately pinched myself for all I was worth. You can see my arms as proof. What was I to do? Suddenly I knew. Edna had brought me to this swirling blob of matter. She had to be able to take me away. I grabbed hold of her, closed my eyes, ran a few steps, and took a flying leap. When I opened my eyes again, we were rushing through the universe. A blue and green ball surrounded by white mist was approaching us at a terrifying pace.

Then I remembered the library book. Miraculously, the pink bubble gum I had been chewing had fallen out of my mouth before I put the mask on and attached itself to my t-shirt. After the book had been pressed against my body (and the bubble gum) so long, it naturally was stuck to me. A few seconds after the realization, we reentered the earth's atmosphere. Then the beautiful earth was rushing up to meet us. I could see trees surrounding my very own house, my hammock, and my dear old penguin. Home, sweet home.

We landed in the tree where the hammock hung. The book was gored by a sharp branch but had it not been there, the branch would be in my stomach.

The book was sent to my older sister, who works as a book binder. Now here it is, good as new – actually, in better condition than when I signed it out. I am alive and well, with only a bruised ear and dislocated nose. If you don't believe me, ask Edna or the book – but good luck doing that. Even if Edna is a wise and unique object, I don't know if the book is.

Sincerely yours,

Meghan Hofer



Dear Librarian Tall Tale Writing Contest for Children 2020

3rd Place Winner

Lucille Maendel

Dear library,

I cannot not return my book, "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe". Having signed out the book, I settled down on a bench outside to wait for my mother. It was dark, so I read by the light of the street lamp. I had nearly finished the book when something strange happened. The wind suddenly changed directions and suddenly I seemed to be on a lion's back, leaping over boulders and bounding over a strange landscape, for now I was in Narnia with the great lion Aslan himself.

After plunging on for hours, we finally stopped. I looked around me and found that we were in a wood. Birds sang sweetly. They seemed to be welcoming me. In a crystal lake, beavers swam. In a clearing, Fauns played on silver flutes. A clear blue sky with a golden sun and puffy white clouds looked down upon naiads, the water people, dipping and playing in the lake with the industrious beavers. "Welcome to Narnia", thundered a deep, kind voice. "Why have you come?" "I had not meant to come here," I answered, "I was reading about a magical world, and then I was on your back! How can I get home?" The deep voice asked, "where are you from?" "New York City," I answered. "We shall see to your homecoming later," boomed the lion, "but there are greater tasks to accomplish first."

With a toss of his mane, Aslan swiftly on. Breathless, I ventured, "where are we going?" The lion answered, "we shall arrive there soon." And indeed, we arrived at a clearing where dryads, naiads, fauns, Giants, horses, leopards, beavers, robins stood around a stone table. I recognized them all from the book. And there were Queen Susan, Queen Lucy, King Peter, and King Edmund surrounded by centaurs, talking trees, dwarves, and hundreds of other creatures. Aslan announced, "the White Witch, Jadis, has returned with her evil wolves. They have taken the little naiad Silver Spray and the faun Swift Hoof. We fear they have to been turned to stone or imprisoned. We must rescue them."

Queen Lucy invited me to ride with her on her white horse. "What is your name?" she asked kindly. "Lucy," I whispered. "Oh!" She exclaimed happily, "we share names!" And with that Aslan's whole army thundered off. Before long we came to a huge fortress with fang-like gates. Just as in the book, stone statues stood everywhere in eerie silence. The company stood still as if waiting. Finally the door creaked open and an evil Wolf stepped out followed by the cruel Witch herself. "So", she sneered, "the great fool has come! Get past me and my Wolf first!" Aslan sprang forward with a roar and the witch fell into a faint. The wolf snarled, but Peter leapt forward and slew it with one stroke of his sword. As we entered the Gates, wolves appeared from everywhere. Aslan cried, "forward, Narnians!" And the

whole host rushed forward, slaying wolves as they went.

At the battle's height, Susan called Lucy and me to follow her. Down a dark stairway we went. Black tunnels. More stairs. Heavily barred dungeons. Keys left in the door by a panicked Wolf. Silver spray. Swift Hoof. We did it! But as we freed them, three ogres leaped out of the gloom. With a twang, an ogre fell with Susan's arrow in it. The bow sang twice more, and two more lifeless ogres fell to the stone floor. As we were leaving, I saw the stone statue of a book on the floor! My book from the library! "How did it get here?" I asked. "We were playing by a big post with a glowing top" silver spray explained. "It was not stone then. But the witch suddenly came and captured us. It was she who turned the book into stone!" "I must have dropped it when I tumbled into Narnia and landed on the lion's back," I concluded.

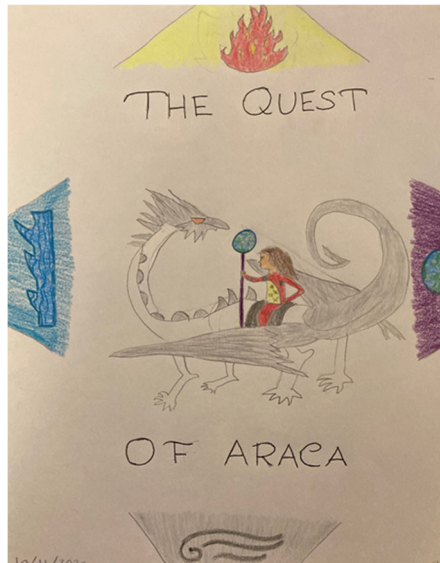
By the time we got back up to the courtyard, the battle was over. The wolves were all dead, and the witch was spared, as she had promised to be a servant of the Narnians forever. After a grand Feast (the witch had to wash the dishes), and still clutching the stone book, I followed Silver Spray to the "post with the glowing top". To my astonishment, it was the very street lamp under which I had been reading! And there was the bench, and the library, just as I had left it. Had it been a dream? But no! There was the book, still made of stone.

So..... Now you know why I cannot return my book to the library!

Sincerely,

Lucille Maendel





The Quest of Araca

A Short Story by Jackie Rivera

Chapter 1

Megan was just your average villager who resided in the kingdom of Araca, home of the Fire Soul. Araca was one of four kingdoms that resembled the four main elements. Each element has a soul that watches over to make sure the kingdoms do not go to war. There's the Fire Soul (Araca), the Water Soul (Picara), the Air Soul (Meriaca), and the Earth Soul (Emorica). These four islands lived in harmony after being reunited 100 years ago across the Yolandian Sea, until Megan found out that there was another war upon the Yolandian Islands.

Chapter 2

It was a peaceful day in Araca. 13-year-old Megan Stollway was getting ready to go on new adventures with her dragon, Marco. It was quite common to have a dragon as a villager, believe it or not. Except that Marco was a white dragon from Meriaca, while the rest were red and were from Araca. She was unsure how a Meriacan dragon got here in the first place. Maybe it flew over without realizing it, she thought. But wait, Meriaca's on the other side of the Yolandian Sea; that can't be possible! She doesn't worry about it for now; she has places to be.

Chapter 3

Megan and Marco arrive at the villager trading center. It's always bustling with busy traders from all over Araca. Megan isn't part of the working class on Wednesdays, so she normally looks around during those days. "Here Marco," she commands. A trader from the west side of town approaches them with concern. This is around where the Charan Forest would be.

The trader says, "What are you doing here? Meriacans are foreigners to this land." Megan was confused. "I'm sorry for confusing you sir, but I'm an Aracaian. My dragon just happens to be from Meriaca." He gives Megan the "evil eye." "You have been

warned. Never come back to this land, just scram already,” he shouts. Megan looked at her neck where her Aracaian villager badge was. How come he didn’t have his badge? How come he gave Megan and Marco that look? Was he a foreigner himself? What in the world was going on?

Chapter 4

After a couple of hours, Megan was finished looking. Everyone was still looking at her and Marco strangely. She didn’t know why; she knew everyone there.

Megan’s friend, Chadwick, smiles at her from one of the fishing boats. “Hey, any luck?” Megan asks. “Nah; harvest season’s already over, and it’s very rare to catch any of the chalupfish out there.” She sighs. She and Chadwick have been the best of friends since birth, but both of their fathers have recently been taken away by Emorican officials. They were only trying to trade with them, but the Picarian king thought that they both stole the Emorica Earth Scepter.

This was the most important thing to the Emorican kingdom, knowing that this is the closest way to reaching the Earth Soul. Unlike Emorica, Araca had a special ritual to gain access to the special scroll. Ever since both of them got accused of stealing the Earth Scepter, Chadwick and Megan haven’t been able to see each other.

It’s been hard for Chadwick to even exit the palace without a single villager watching him like a hawk, thinking that he would follow in his father’s footsteps. Unlike Megan, who got looks for owning a Meriacan dragon, Chadwick actually lives in the palace. His father is actually a knight, believe it or not!

Hopefully, this doesn’t have anything to do with her father.

Chapter 5

Chadwick and Megan went to the palace. Megan was questioning whether she would bring her dragon or leave it at her hut. She decided to leave it because she definitely did not want to get in trouble at the palace. Megan arrives in a toasty cloak hand-sewn by her grandmother. One of the main guards said, “Show your badge, or it’s the dungeon for you.” Megan takes off her cloak, shivering. She was wondering why everyone was so protective today. Chadwick also shows his badge to the guard. The castle doors now open to let both of them inside.

“Whew, it’s freezing! You didn’t bring a cloak?” Megan asks Chadwick. “No; you see, my mom was supposed to make me one, but you know,” Chadwick quietly responds.

“Oh.” Megan did not think about what happened to Chadwick’s mom years ago. She was the only female guard on a ship with around 50 men. They were sent to a guard training, similar to where Megan’s father went only five years earlier. There was a roaring storm, rocking the boat side to side, the waves increasing by height, and eventually sinking the ship.

It was a shipwreck.

Chapter 6

Eventually, Megan and Chadwick decide to explore. “Woah. This is the rumored documents room you were talking about?!” Megan asks, in shock.

She has never been in this room before; it has always been locked. Chadwick somehow found the key to the room in the west hall. “Yep. We’re not supposed to be in here though, so we have to be quick,” Chadwick explains. Megan makes her way towards a huge book that caught her eye. “Hmm, what’s this?” Megan asks. She opens the book, eventually turning to chapter 12.

Her eyes grew wider as she scanned each word on the page. It couldn't be true. She started at the top and began to read it again.

There were numerous historical records and secrets about her family tree. Her great grandfather was a king; her aunt has stolen from shipwrecks and other expensive landmarks; her cousin Joann was the one who was a big part of recreating the kingdom the way it should be; and it even mentioned her name. Megan Stollway, future queen, and powerful influence. Okay sure, she knew that Joann favored her the most, but was it a prediction? The accuracy about each sentence started to increase. "Oh no," she cried. "My father's in trouble!"

Chapter 7

"What's wrong, Megan?" Chadwick asked immediately.

"My father's in trouble! Look at this section! It predicts the future of Araca if nobody does anything about what's going on now." The section read, "On the night of the 1,000th full moon, a war will rise upon the four islands. Thanks to Picara, the troubling water soul, more chaos and starvation will be upon harvest and frost season, unless a young lad or lassie under the age of 18 can try to reunite the islands once more."

"Why in the world does it say that you are a future queen and a powerful influence? You're not even part of the royal family," Chadwick wondered. "No but, how do you think my dad got this job? It's because of Joann, who sacrificed her life to reunite the islands. Of course, she's dead now, but maybe I can try to rebuild her legacy and become queen," Megan explains.

Chadwick did not like this idea one bit. He sighs. "Megan, just how are we going to do this? How would we get to Picara? And how long ago was the 1,000th full moon? Four months ago. It's probably too late."

"Cargo boat."

"What?" Chadwick asked.

"I heard a bell for a cargo boat. What if we snuck into the back of that boat- with Marco and your dragon- and take it from there? We'll have to be armed however."

"You're crazy, but I guess I'm somewhat in on the idea. Just so you know, if we die, it's all on you."

Chapter 8

A few minutes later, Megan, Chadwick, Marco and Chadwick's dragon Amethyst get to the docks.

"I'm a little nervous," Chadwick said. "Just keep your cool. Act normal," Megan whispers. Megan put Marco in some armor so nobody would think that the two of them were being suspicious. Not the best idea, but it was better than nothing.

"Hi sir, do you know where the cargo boat is? I'm a worker and I need to check to see if everything's loaded," Chadwick asked in disguise. "Um yes, the boat's about to leave in ten minutes. While you're over there, tell the captain to make sure that the fuel tank is full; we don't want another one of those issues," the guard replied. That was actually simpler than he anticipated it to be. The plan was working perfectly.

Chapter 9

One hour into the ride to Picara, the two of them start to feel seasick.

"Ugh, why does the boat have to rock so much?" Chadwick complains.

"I don't know, but I wonder what's inside these boxes."

She opens up one of the boxes. "I knew it. These are weapons."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

“Throw them overboard?”

“Ding, ding, ding!” Chadwick responded.

Megan and Chadwick start to throw all the boxes overboard. They kept the important weapons such as swords but threw out the explosive ones so that the war doesn’t get out of hand.

Chapter 10

Two hours later, Picara is in everyone’s sight. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people, specifically guards, waiting at the front of the deck. “Okay, we have to get out of here,” Megan suggests. “Okay, let’s roll,” Chadwick responds.

Meanwhile, the guards are looking through the boxes and realized that the important items are missing.

“Uh bud, are you sure that you put all the bombs on board?” a guard asked. “I’m 100% sure,” the captain responds. “Was there anyone else on board with you?”

“No, sir.”

“Really? Then explain how there are two people on dragons that just escaped the back of your boat.”

The captain was surprised. How in the world did he not catch this? “Oh boy. Guards, catch them!”

Chapter 11

“Okay, now that we’re here, what do we do next?” Chadwick asks

“Well, we have to somehow figure out why and how Picara started this and try to fix the problem before things get worse,” Megan explains.

Both of them see the battleground up ahead. Maybe this has something to do with the Earth Scepter, Megan thinks to herself. That’s when an idea popped into her head. “Chadwick, we have to get to the Picarian palace; maybe they have information as to where everything’s located. Or at least some clues; I’m sure they have a documents room somewhere.” Chadwick turned towards the battleground and saw seventeen guards coming their way.

“Oh no. The guards!” Chadwick exclaims. Megan turned abruptly. “Quick! Get on your dragon! We can get to the palace quicker that way!” Amethyst and Marco start flying as fast as they could.

Chapter 12

Little did they know that there was battling going on above ground, as well.

“Ah! Retreat! Retreat!” Chadwick shouted. “Oh, bossleberries, the people near us have bows and arrows, and we only came prepared with swords.”

“That reminds me- we still have to feed the dragons their bossleberries!” Megan realized.

“Don’t worry about that now. We need to get to the palace!”

Slightly behind them are two more guards that are trying to aim with their dragons’ superpowers. Both of the dragons seem to be from Meriaca. Their dragons controlled powerful winds to knock out enemies.

“They’re Meriacan dragons; we’re good,” Chadwick explained.

Chadwick forgot that Megan’s dragon is also from Meriaca. “Oops,” he realized. A few minutes later, Marco starts to turn around

towards the other dragons- the guards' dragons.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" one of the guards asked. "I- I'm sorry. We were just trying to get to the palace... and, and... well, if you tried to not chase us, we can explain," Megan lied.

"Hmm, okay. To the palace!"

Chapter 13

All of them get to the palace and meet in the main hall.

"So... you were going to explain?" the guard asked impatiently.

"Yes. Well you see, me and my companion Chadwick here decided to go to the Aracaian palace, and we gained access to the documents room because we happened to find the key on the floor."

"You guys are from Araca? But wait, the girl has a white dragon just like us."

"Well yes, but the Meriacan dragon happened to find his way here," Chadwick explained.

"You know, if a Meriacan dragon happens to go to Araca or the other way around, it's actually a sign of danger. Same goes for Emorica and Picara," the other guard explains.

"Well, cool to know. Anyways, in the document room, I saw a book titled "The Future of All Things" just lying in the center of the desk, and I saw my name. And my father's. And it said that Picara is trying to kill all the guards at the Emorica training camp! And it also mentioned this section here." She happened to bring the book with her. "Look, here it says, 'On the night of the 1,000th full moon, a war will rise upon the four islands. Thanks to Picara, the troubling water soul, more chaos and starvation will be upon harvest and frost season, unless a young lad or lassie under the age of 18 can try to reunite the islands once more.'"

"Wow. I mean, there has been a lack of food lately."

"How would we reunite the islands is my question." Megan wondered.

Chadwick suddenly remembered something that his mother told him while reading a fairytale. "That's it! Try to find the Earth Scepter, put it in its designated spot, and boom, we reunite the islands!"

"Just where in the world did you get that ludicrous idea from?!"

"From a fairytale that my mom used to read to me every night. It's not the best idea, but it's worth a try."

"You know what? That might just work," Megan cheerfully replied. "Let's search!"

Chapter 14

After hours of searching, they surprisingly haven't been caught. But, they haven't looked in one place-the King's throne. Megan sighs. "Well, I guess we have to do it at this point."

The guards look at each other nervously. "We have to be quiet though," one of them said. They tiptoe inside and of course, they run into the king, who happened to have a sharpened sword in his hand. He chuckles. "So, I see that you decide to intrude without a warning. You should be protecting the kingdom, not spying on me!"

"Where is the scepter?" Megan loudly interrupts.

"Say what?" the king asks.

"Answer the question. Where's the Emorican scepter? I know you have it somewhere."

"Ask Eric Stollway. He's locked up for it."

"Yes, but he was falsely accused by a certain Picarian king. I'm his daughter, and I know you're hiding it somewhere."

"You'll have to go through me first, little lady."

"Not so fast," one of the guards said. Everyone started fighting with their swords. "Go, before it's too late!" Chadwick exclaims. Megan rushes over to the royal closet and sees the scepter right in front of the queen's dress. Better make this quick, she said to herself. She rushes back over to where everyone else is still fighting. "Come on! We have to go to Emorica to sort everything out!"

All of them rush back to the hall where the dragons are.

"I'll get you next time! You watch, little girl! You just watch!"

Chapter 15

After over an hour of traveling, they finally arrive. They head to the Emorican palace with the scepter in Megan's hand. The rest of the villagers looked at them in awe. They see a guard at the front of the palace entrance. He saw the scepter and immediately let them in. "I knew it wasn't Eric!" the guard said to himself. Megan smiles. "I did it for you, Dad. You're free!"

She enters the huge room with pride. A crowd starts to watch a person who was about to reunite the islands in seconds. "It's time," Chadwick says.

Megan places the scepter on the designated place. Seconds later, everyone starts to clap wildly and roar with excitement. She never thought that Chadwick's plan would actually work.

Epilogue

Well, after reading this, you're probably wondering what this girl is doing now. Well, let's just say that the prediction was right. Five years later, all four islands become reunited more than before. They are now one big kingdom. After Megan graduated school, she married Chadwick and they both became queen and king. Everyone now looks up to them, and the king was sentenced to death by everyone in the new kingdom.

The new kingdom was now named Yolandia. Megan's dad was released from the Emorican dungeon and is now living his life without having to worry about being locked up ever again. Even though he could've become king, he wanted Megan to be honored, knowing that she was the one that made this story a happy ending.

Autumn in Basel

by Kristie Benel

It's November and the best two weeks of the year are about to start. That is, if you live in Basel, Switzerland, like I did when I was six. Here in this little city on the Rhine, almost medieval with its old gates, and towers and churches, there comes with the fall and cold weather the Herbstmesse — a pre-Christmas celebration that turns this ancient town into a child's fantasy filled with candy, lights, music, rides, and the smell of every kind of food imaginable. All of this unfolds in several plazas across town, each with its own personality. There by the convention center, where you can buy everything from appliances to wine, are the wildest rides that go late into the night. Across the river, by the university, is the Petersplatz which is known for its stalls offering confections and gifts, and there is a marionette theater there too. Further up, by the Barfüsserplatz, which is a hub for the city's trams, you can find shooting galleries and kiddie-rides and men roasting chestnuts which you can buy by the bag. There is an alley which you can take from here. It winds up on a slope until you find yourself at the Münsterplatz — one of my favorite plazas in the city because it is there, in a stately house on the corner, across from the cathedral, that I have watched the Herbstmesse come to life from the window of my school.

For the past two weeks, my classmates and I watched trucks arrive filled with iron girders and cables and big iron bolts which were unloaded by muscular men in coveralls. They labored throughout the days, shouting to each other in languages I didn't understand, and slowly the rides rose up from the cobblestones of the plaza — one of them a Ferris wheel as high as the cathedral across the street, maybe higher, which we watched come together bit by bit, like an erector set. And now, on this day, the first big day of Herbstmesse, I sit in school with unbearable excitement. Not only because the festival is about to officially start, but because my Godmother has promised to pick me up after school and take me to the fair.

But, right now I'm tucked away in the little library on the uppermost floor of my school, reading my favorite book about a dragon, but I can hardly concentrate on the words. My classmates sit around me, each reading their favorite books too, but they can't concentrate either. They are just as excited as me to get out of school today. Soon, it's time to go back to our classroom. We go through the door with the green curtain hanging in front. We pass the art room where we have made many wonderful art projects. We also pass our religion classroom, where our favorite teacher is cleaning up after our last lesson. I see her guinea pig plushie that looks just like the one I have in my school bag. I always bring a stuffed animal to school with me. We make our way down the ancient stairs that creak with every step.

Once we reach the bottom of the steps, we turn left and go into our classroom. I breathe in the familiar smell, which is almost musty, but not quite. It is the smell of varnished wood and, for me, history. The first graders, who share our classroom, are all standing at the window. My seven fellow second graders and I rush over to them to see what's going on. Outside, I see the spokes of the Ferris wheel turning in front of the red brick walls and gargoyled spires, and diamond shingled roof of the cathedral called the Münster. Every piece of the wheel is now in place, and the workmen who built it are giving it a final test before it is ready to go. Just like the stalls in the park beside the cathedral where the vendors are starting to roll up their storefronts and delicious foods are now being prepared. Normally, it is a quiet park inhabited only by rows of plain trees full of bushy green leaves. But tonight, and for the next two weeks, there will be crowds moving beneath their bare branches in the chilly autumn air.

Usually, our teachers are stricter, but today they let us linger by the window and watch the activity going on outside, and it isn't long anyway until we are free to go. I grab my coat and schoolbag, and hurry down the steep, creaky steps to the ground floor where my Godmother is waiting by the door to the plaza. She sees me coming towards her, and she quickly wraps me in an embrace. She smells of makeup, perfume, and something else I could never place but it's a sweet, homey smell that makes me feel warm and happy. She wears her familiar deep red lipstick and green eye-

shadow. Her hair is straight and blonde, and freckles dot her face. Beside her is her husband, George, with his gray hair and drooping mustache. I give him a hug too, then my Godmother takes my hand in hers, and we walk out into the chaotic paradise I've been anticipating.

Outside, the streets are starting to bustle with activity. People are everywhere, lining up at the stalls, and waiting on line for the Ferris wheel or the giant slide in front of the Münster. My Godmother takes me to the Ferris wheel, and she buys tickets for all three of us. After a long wait, we finally get into one of the gondolas, and we travel into the sky. As we rise I look down at the roof of my school. It looks so different from up here! Once we reach the top of the Ferris wheel, we can see far and wide. Past the Münster, on the other side of the river, is my house. I look for it, but all I can see are rooftops. But further in the distance, I can see the hills before the Black Forest and Germany, and I can even make out vineyards with their grape vines turning fiery red. I turn the other way and look out over the city. I can see the other plazas that are starting to fill up with people. I can see the Spalenberg with the university and music school on top, and beyond this, the land giving way to inner Switzerland and France. My Godmother and George are pointing things out to me, but I'm more concerned about the possibility that our gondola could fall.

Once the Ferris wheel ride is over, we head to the giant slide. This is always one of my favorite rides of Herbstmesse. It's one of those slides where there are multiple tracks, so several people can go down at once, and you have to sit on a canvas sack to slide down. I go down many times until my Godmother says it's time to go to the Petersplatz. George smiles under his drooping mustache because he knows, just like I do, that's where all the best food is.

We walk through the city until we reach the plaza beside the university library. People are browsing the stalls that are decorated for Christmas, and they're talking and laughing under colorful lights strung from storefront to storefront. Kids are everywhere too, begging for candies and toys, and spicy, sweet smells scent the air. Bratwurst and knackwurst sizzle on stovetops. Chestnuts roast in tiny carts with big pans.

My Godmother and I stop to look at some Christmas ornaments in a stall, and when we turn around George is gone. My Godmother calls his name, but there is no reply. We start walking, looking for him amongst the hundreds of people. Finally, we spot him at a food stand selling Chäschüechli — little cups of pie dough filled with a mixture of melted cheeses and heavy cream. George eats three, and my Godmother buys four more, two for me and two for her.

Once we have eaten, we go play some games. There are many different games you can play, like throwing bags at cans to knock them over, shooting at targets, or racing tiny metal horses. We win a few prizes, and then George is gone again. This time, we find him at a bratwurst stand. He eats two sausages, as well as a thick piece of fresh bread that comes with every order. "Are you already hungry after all those Chäschüechli?" my Godmother asks playfully. George just grins.

Next, we go look at some stands selling everything from clothes, to wooden spoons, to candles. We look at gnome statues, at paintings, and snow globes, at jars of honey, hats, and chocolate. We come to a stand selling stuffed animals. My Godmother knows I love stuffed animals, so she says I can pick one out. I choose a brown turtle with a green shell and green eyes. I name him Coco.

George has disappeared again. This time, we don't look for him. Instead, we go to a more open part of the square where there are big trampolines with metal poles attached to the sides. Fastened to the poles are bungee cords with straps on the end. We go to one of the trampolines and a man puts the straps around me, making sure they're secure. I start jumping and the bungee cords slingshot me high in the air. I jump higher and higher, the wind blowing my hair like a wild woman. I see other kids doing flips, but I am too scared to try. I don't know why I'm afraid. Instead I just keep jumping straight in the air, enjoying the sensation of weightlessness.

Once my time is up, the man takes the straps off of me again, and we head to another ride, which is a roller coaster that looks like a green caterpillar, with red dots and a big smiling face. It's supposed to be for smaller kids, but my Godmother squeezes in beside me. We take the front seat, and the ride starts. To me in that baby roller coaster, it felt like we were zipping around the track, and I shrieked and laughed with the other riders.

After the ride, we go and look for George. This time, we find him eating a huge pretzel, with a second one in a bag tucked under his arm. When he's done eating the first one, he goes right to the second one without a pause. My Godmother and I laugh and she asks, pulling on his mustache "How could you possibly eat so much my little Obelix?" Obelix is a character from a famous comic book, "Asterix und Obelix", and he is a big, round celt who loves to eat and fight Romans. I've never seen George fight any Romans, but he sure does love to eat!

Now we go to the main attraction of the Petersplatz, a two-level carousel. I ask if I can ride it, and my Godmother says yes, so we weave our way to the ticket booth. I decide to go to the top level, and I sit on a white horse. I go round and round, and every time I pass my Godmother I wave and she waves back. I go a second time, and this time I choose a brown horse on the bottom level.

After the ride is over, George buys some chestnuts and eats the whole bag himself. I don't like chestnuts much anyway, so my Godmother buys me cotton candy. I pull off little bits at a time and lick the spun sugar off my sticky fingers.

We look at more stands, and my Godmother buys a few knick-knacks for her home. The sun is slowly starting to go down, so we head to a stand selling gebrannte mandeln — almonds with a sugar coating that is almost caramelized and crunchy, and she buys a big bag for us to share. We eat until we can't fit any more, and then George finishes the rest.

My Godmother decides that it's time to take me home, so we leave Petersplatz and walk back across the city, over the Mittlere Brücke, one of the three bridges that span the Rhine. The old-fashioned street lamps snap on, illuminating our path, and the flags strung on the railings flap on the river breeze. We take the winding streets to the apartment building where my parents are waiting. We ring the bell at the front door and my mother buzzes us in. We go up the steps to the second floor where my parents are waiting in the doorway. I run and hug them, and they hug my Godmother and George.

We all go into the apartment, and my parents talk to my Godmother and George for a while. Then, George says that it's getting late and they should leave, so they hug me goodbye once more and I thank them for the fun day, and then they go. I run to the window and wave until they disappear up the block. Afterwards, I tell my mother and father about my day. I tell them about the fun games and rides, I show them Coco, and I tell them how much George ate. They laugh.

A little while later, it's time to go to bed. I get into my pajamas and brush my teeth. I give my Father a kiss good-night, and then my Mother takes me to my bed. I lay down and she shuts the light, then sits next to me gently stroking my hair. I pull the covers up under my chin and close my eyes. I drift off to sleep with a smile upon my face.

It is good to be loved.



PEP TALK

by Jackie Rivera

Hey you. Yes you.

Are you not in your moment right now?

Do you need something to boost your happiness?

That's what a pep talk is for!

Dream what seemed impossible when you were 8 years old and make it possible.

Believe that you can do it.

"I can't though."

YES

YOU

CAN

Inspire others to follow your footsteps.

Be the leader. Be the one to change.

Create your ideas on more than just a piece of paper.

Reflect on your mistakes.

Share your ideas with the world.

And most importantly, say to yourself,

"I can do it!"



Miles Eyler Raises \$1,000 for the Gardiner Library

In January the Gardiner Library honored 11-year-old Miles Eyler for his efforts in their winter Read-a-Thon raising \$1,000 to be put towards youth programming. According to library director, Nicole Lane, "We wanted to give the youth in our community a chance to combine their love of reading with an opportunity to make a difference locally."

Over the summer of 2021 the Gardiner Library will be hosting our second Read-a-Thon giving you a chance to beat our reigning champion. Miles said "'I did it because I love reading and I love the library.'" If you love to read and want to help your library, get involved. No amount raised is too small. There will be various opportunities to win prizes and everyone will receive community service hours for the time they spent reading and collecting sponsors. Look out for details as summer approaches.

THE END