

Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists



Illustration by Katya Lopatko, age 13, from "Christmas Magic," page 5

ANOTHER WAY TO WIN

This was it! This was what Jessie had been working towards!

STRANGER

Gale is OK with his new life, but he longs to see his old house again

Also: A new story from Adam Jacobs

Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists

VOLUME 38, NUMBER 2

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STORIES

Christmas Magic by Lizzy Teerlink 5

Lizzy loves this story her dad told her every Christmas

Another Way to Win by Nadia Froese 9

Jessie is a nervous wreck on her way to the competition

The Balance by Kia Okuma 15

Music is a source of peace and happiness for Kia

Stranger by Emma Dudley 19

Gale has always felt like an outsider, a stranger

Where the Heart Is by Amanda Valdovinos 29

Liesa and Chloe are reluctant to leave their beloved home

Longing by Emily Schneider 35

Not all Christmases are white

Bad Dinner by Adam Jacobs 39

How could Jason's dad take a job in another state?

Twenty-Six by Adrienne Hobensee 43

Gracie is determined to beat Louis at chin-ups

POEMS

Dawn by Sophia Gebrmann 7

White by Dylan Sherman 12

A New Brother by Ryan Sparks 27

The Brown-and-White Tabby by Mia Ba-Lu Hildebrandt . . 36

BOOK REVIEWS

Iron Jaw & Hummingbird reviewed by Ryan McManaman . . 16

Little Audrey reviewed by Alaina Stout 32



page 9



page 15



page 19



page 39



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Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists

WELCOME TO ALL OUR READERS, old and new! We've had the pleasure of publishing *Stone Soup* for over 35 years. It is our belief that, by presenting rich, heart-felt work by young people the world over, we can stir the imaginations of our readers and inspire young writers and artists to create.



Jessie Moore, 12

Contributors' Guidelines

Stone Soup welcomes submissions from young people through age 13. For our complete guidelines, please visit our Web site: stonesoup.com.

Story and poem authors: Please do not enclose a self-addressed envelope with your submission. Send copies of your work, not originals. If we decide to consider your work for a future issue, you will hear from us within four weeks. If you do not hear from us, it means we were not able to use your work. Don't be discouraged! Try again!

Book reviewers: If you are interested in reviewing books for *Stone Soup*, write editor Gerry Mandel. Tell her a little about yourself and the kinds of books you like to read. Enclose an SASE for her reply.

Artists: If you would like to illustrate for *Stone Soup*, send Ms. Mandel three samples of your artwork, along with a letter saying what you like to draw most. Enclose an SASE for her reply. We need artists who can draw or paint complete scenes in color. Please send color copies of your work, not originals.

All contributors: Send us writing and art about the things you feel most strongly about! Whether your work is about imaginary situations or real ones, use your own experiences and observations to give your work depth and a sense of reality. Send your work to *Stone Soup*, Submissions Dept., P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Include your name, age, birthdate, home address, phone number and e-mail.

Cover: Katya Lopatko has been drawing since she learned to hold a marker. She began taking art lessons last January. In the spring she won second place in the Texas division of the Wildlife Forever State-Fish Art Contest. When she's not drawing, Katya volunteers at the local animal shelter, and she swims on the swim team.

The Mailbox



LBP, 9

Hey! I'm turning fourteen pretty soon. I've had fun appearing in *Stone Soup* in the past; I even got a letter from Garrison Keillor for one of the stories I wrote. I suppose this is a thank-you and goodbye as well. Your magazine has given kids with talent a reason not to wait to be great (unintentional rhyme). I will definitely submit to more magazines now.

ADAM JACOBS, 13

Brooklyn Park, Minnesota

Adam wrote "They're Pigs" [January/February 2007], "Snow Fights" [January/February 2008], and "Bad Dinner" on page 39 of this issue.

I've been getting *Stone Soup* magazine for a while now, and I'd like to point out one of my favorite stories, "To Be a Swan," by Alison Buick [March/April 2009]. I take ballet lessons three times a week so this story really touched me. The illustrations were also really great. Even though I love to dance, no matter how hard I try I just can't draw it, and Daria Lugina did a wonderful job. I love this magazine because I love to write. But what I really enjoy is reading other people's writing that are my age, and this magazine does that.

ZOE PHILLIPS, 10

Moss Beach, California

I am a first-year grade-five writing teacher at St. Francis Intermediate School in Billings, Montana. One of the final projects I assigned to my students was to prepare a piece of writing for publication. Their goal was to submit their work to *Stone Soup*. This was a project that both excited and motivated my young writers. Thank you for offering a beautiful landscape for young authors to showcase their words and imaginations.

MARIA SCHUSTER, TEACHER

Billings, Montana

For years the kids' stories in *Stone Soup* magazine have captivated, entranced, moved, and educated me. I am inspired by all the children that have gotten published. Their perseverance and determination keeps me from giving up writing.

CARLY STONE, 13

Long Beach, California

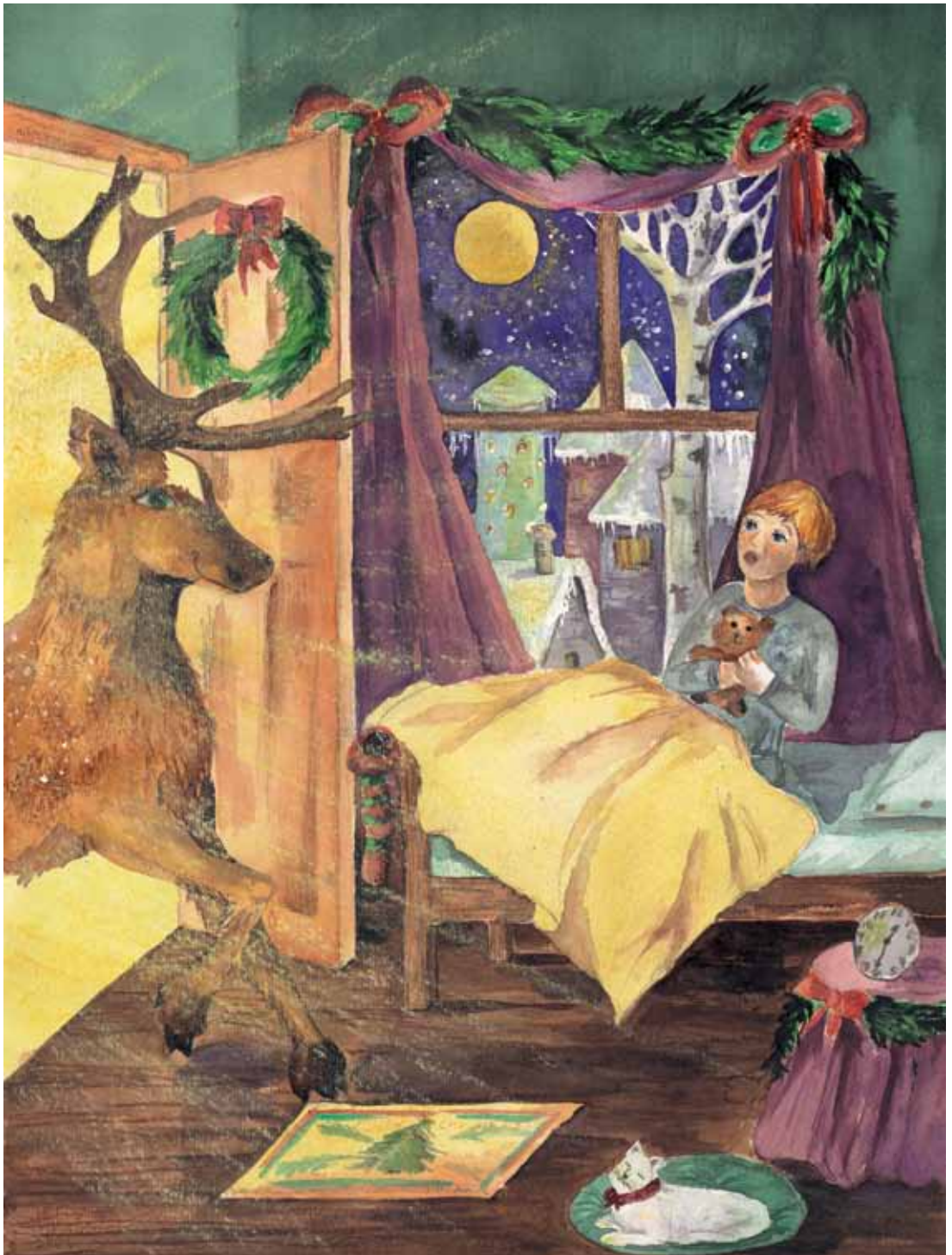
My name is William Gwaltney, and I have written for *Stone Soup* for a number of years now. I would just like to say that I have seen some incredible work in *Stone Soup* over the years. I have seen not only talented writers, but talented illustrators as well. I know that someday I will pick up books in my local library and will recognize the names of some of the people I once worked with at *Stone Soup*. You guys are that good. I also know that there are many more excellent writers out there. Some may be too humble to try submitting a story to the magazine. To those people I say, you will never know if you could have been published unless you try. Others may have submitted a story and had it rejected. What I want those people to know is that my first story was rejected too. And other stories that I liked and submitted were rejected as well. You just can't give up. You must always keep trying. One of the best pieces of advice I ever got (that I am now giving to you) is to start your next story the minute you put one in the mail. That way, if your story is not published, you will already have the next one ready to send out. As Winston Churchill once said, "Never, never give up."

WILLIAM GWALTNEY, 14

Englewood, Colorado

Nine of William's stories were published in Stone Soup over the past four years. Thank you, Will, and good luck!

Note to our readers: Send us your letters! We are especially interested in detailed comments about specific stories, poems, book reviews, and illustrations. We also like to receive anecdotes (150 words or less) about interesting experiences you want to share with our readers. Send letters to The Mailbox, *Stone Soup*, P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Include your name, age, birthdate, home address, phone number and e-mail.



The door swung open and a tall majestic creature stepped through

Christmas Magic

By **Lizzy Teerlink**

Illustrated by **Katya Lopatko**

STARS GAZED DROWSILY out from the folds of an indigo night sky. The yellowish glow of the moon painted shadows of the toothy Chicago skyline over the streets. A white expanse coated the city and, for once, the bustling streets were quieted. The ground was vacant of footsteps because the only visitor that would be out tonight traveled in the air. My dad stared out of his bedroom window, his eyelids hanging heavily as he waited, drowsy and impatient, for Christmas morning.

My dad pressed his hand against the cold, wooden frame of the window, popping it open. A crisp, cool wind briskly grazed the tip of his ear and a pleasant shudder rippled through his body. He stuck his tongue out to catch a playful snowflake flitting in front of his nose. It did a gentle pirouette and landed on his tongue, melting like an ice cube in hot cocoa. He stuck his head further out the window, like a dog in a pickup truck, leaning over the sill. The pointy rooftops, surrounding his home, sparkled in the moonlight, edges softened by the snow. Snowflakes tiptoed across the spindled branches of the naked birch outside his window, spiraling gracefully to the ground. My dad longed so much to jump out of the window and join them. His chin rested against the palm of his hand, and, as his thoughts drifted into sugarplums and gingerbread, promises of tomorrow danced in vivid bright colors.

A noise, almost like a tower of blocks crashing down, split through the silence. My dad jerked his head from the window with a start, pulling himself out of a peaceful sleep. He blinked



Lizzy Teerlink, 13
San Francisco, California



Katya Lopatko, 13
Grapevine, Texas

*Based on a story
Lizzy's dad told her
every Christmas.*

his eyes groggily, gazing from his bookshelf to his bed stand, both painted a hazy black by the shadows. The only sound was the continuous ticking of the clock, both of its bold black hands pointing at the twelve. I knew it wasn't morning already, he thought as he lay his head back down, disgruntled.

It was exactly 12:31 when the door was gently bumped open. The light from the hallway streaked a yellow line across his dark wall. A brown, furry snout pushed its way through the small crack of the door. My dad watched this scene from half-open eyelids, his brain still trying to decide whether this was real or still part of his dream. As the door creaked, my dad pressed his body against the windowpane, the cold, smooth glass chilling his skin through the thin fabric of his pajamas and waking up his brain. This was not a dream. Fear arose in his heart, the nightmares of his earlier childhood ran through his head like a black-and-white film. The snout was crested with a twitching, black nose, cautiously searching for a hint of what was behind the door. The creature took a delicate step forward, revealing a thin, bony leg covered in brown fur. The door swung open and a tall majestic creature stepped through. The reindeer's forehead was marked with a white diamond placed in between two dark, brown eyes. They were so innocent and gentle, sparkling in the moonlight.

The fear that had once pulsed along with my dad's heart was immediately wiped away. The deer stepped closer with

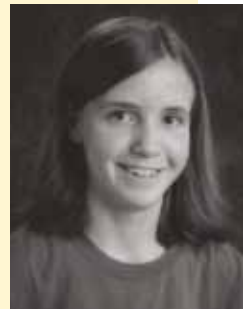
its head bent down and its ears pricked. He sucked in his breath. The deer's coat was the color of cinnamon on a freshly baked roll with spots scattered over its back, white as snow. The deer was in arm's reach now. Should he dare? He didn't have time to decide though, because the deer leaned forward and gently nuzzled him in the ribs. Its touch was warm and soft, sending magic unfurling in his heart like a morning flower, its exuberant, orange petals peeling open in the light. Bursts of fireworks sizzled in his head, as my dad lifted his shaking hand and laid it on the deer's smooth coat. He stroked the deer's fur, back and forth, back and forth. Then a small chuckle erupted from the hallway. The deer immediately turned and silently galloped out of the room.

The warmth of the reindeer still tickled his skin as my dad watched the door gently click shut. Bowing his head down, he explored his hand with all his senses, it smelled like snow and warm honey, it was warm, sticky and moist. Smiling, he curled up against the windowsill, pressing his hand to his chest. It fit snugly and felt like magic. His tired eyes flew across the sky one more time and rested on the pale, white orb, the queen of night looking down upon her loyal subjects, the twinkling stars. My dad smiled, his eyes dancing from the trees to the endless heavens above. "Merry Christmas!" he whispered, his words carrying through a crack in his window and up into the indigo, night sky. ❀

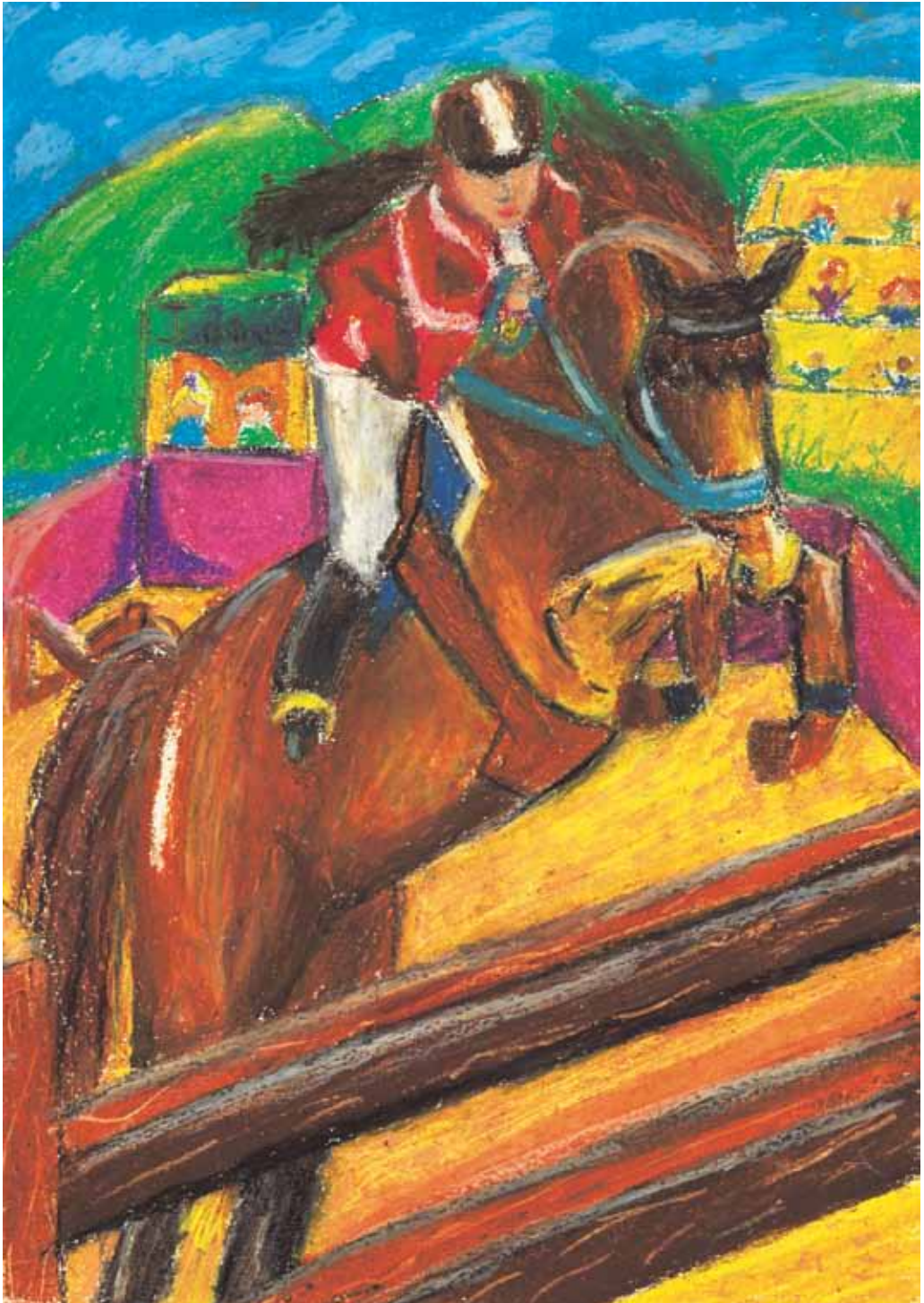
Dawn

By Sophia Gehrmann

The gray sky wavers
Between day and night.
A distant train whistle blows
Skimming the solidity of the moment.
Quiet again,
The atmosphere is unreal.
No movement,
Other than the occasional rustle
Of wind stirring leaves.
A brave bird calls out,
Unsettled by the silence.
No reply.
The heavens lighten,
Until finally
The sun appears,
Smiling upon the world.
The birds now begin to sing,
A chorus of relief,
All with the same message:
The day has come.



Sophia Gehrmann, 13
Urbana, Illinois



Jessie forgot there was anyone in the world but her and Bailey

Another Way to Win

By **Nadia Froese**

Illustrated by **Annie Liu**

JESSICA TERRY SAT in the front seat of the truck, her window half rolled down, willing cool air to come in and blow the sweat off her face and hands. Her thick, dark hair blew, untamed, around her pretty face and large, dark eyes. “How much longer, Dad?” Jessie asked, and felt a sudden flutter in her stomach.

This was what she had been working towards for the past many months. This was what she had driven for, and a lot of labor and sweat had gone into her hope for success at this event.

But now, Jessie was seriously questioning her ability to go into this. She had changed overnight from the sensible, stubborn, and never-give-up girl she was into an emotional wreck. She tugged on her dark hair again, waiting for her father’s response.

“Not too long now, hon.” He looked into her worried eyes and let out a soft chuckle. “Don’t worry, honey. You and Bailey are only the most fantastic performers in the country! You’ll do fine.”

Jessie gave him a wobbly smile. “Sure,” she said. “And someday pigs will fly,” she huffed under her breath, so soft even her father’s keen ears did not pick up her doubts.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Jessie was in the warm-up ring. Bailey felt fresh and distant beneath her, like he was one being and she was another. Her face closed and annoyed, Jessie watched other riders canter their horses perfectly over a small warm-up course of three-foot jumps. Jessie warmed up at a trot



Nadia Froese, 13
Vancouver, British Columbia,
Canada



Annie Liu, 12
Somerset, New Jersey

and then a canter, but Bailey wasn't going well for her. Deciding to ignore it instead of deal with it, Jessie urged him over a low two-foot vertical. He launched himself into the air at an off-stride and sent Jessie flying into the dirt on the other side of the jump. Her face literally burning, Jessie picked herself up and went to go catch her pony. Bailey had an evil glint in his eye when she angrily grabbed his reins.

Settling down, Jessie began to trot Bailey around the ring. It wasn't a good trot, though. It was an unconnected, novice trot, and although Jessie knew it looked fine, she realized that her many years of hard work, learning how to trot perfectly, were really nothing compared to the beautiful, framed, airy, and connected trots others were warming up on. Jessie picked up a canter, but it was flat and bored, not the springy, exciting-to-watch canter it should have been. Jessie was getting ready to jump a two-foot oxer when her father came running over.

"Jessie," he called, "you're up in two riders!" He obviously saw the shock and horror on her face as she brought Bailey to a walk before he added, "Get to the arena, hon. Don't worry, you'll be fine."

"But Dad," Jessie objected, "I haven't even warmed up over a low cross-jump! How in the world will we jump four feet?!"

"You'll do fine," he repeated, obviously unable to add any more encouraging words. With a grunt and moan of frustration, Jessie followed him to the show arena.

"YOUR NEXT RIDER is Jessica Terry on Bailey Star, number 897. Jessica Terry on Bailey Star, number 897."

Jessie barely heard the announcement, so nervous was she. She trotted in, circled once, and pushed Bailey into a rock-solid canter. She waited until she had momentarily tamed the butterflies dancing in her stomach before heading towards the first jump. For a second, she felt the old Jessie coming back, just a little bit. This was it! This was what she had been working towards! Then a sudden shudder of nerves ran through her stomach, and Bailey faltered. She retrieved him immediately with a firm squeeze and then focused on counting down the strides towards their first jump.

Three, two, one. Jessie felt Bailey lift up into the air. He soared over the jump, landed on light feet, and, to Jessie's instruction, turned towards the three-foot-nine oxer. The stubborn, irritating horse he'd been in the warm-up ring was gone, and Jessie thanked the heavens for it, even if she wasn't in the time and place to puzzle over why exactly he was all of a sudden a dream to ride.

Jessie was so concentrated and focused, she forgot there was anyone in the world but her and Bailey. The next few jumps passed in a blur of flight, suspension, and the soft thud of hooves on sand. But even Jessie could detect the crowd hush as they made their way towards the wall. This jump was large, solid, and terrifying. They hadn't been permitted to warm up over a wall, and that was part of the drama of it.

Jessie had to get this right!

A spider of self-doubt began to crawl into her stomach. She didn't have time to shoo it away, and before she knew it, Bailey had launched himself into the air! Caught off guard, Jessie was thrown forward into the saddle. She sat back hard, trying to regain her balance, but made Bailey's hind end so suddenly heavy that his back hooves knocked the jump and a few bricks went flying. Jessie tasted bitter disappointment as they landed, but she knew what she had to do. If her riding coach had taught her anything, it was to continue the round as if everything was perfect, even if she'd messed up big-time.


Jessie put all her concentration in getting over the last few jumps spotlessly and effortlessly. They flew over the last jump, and the crowd broke into applause as Jessie brought Bailey down to a walk and exited the arena. Jessie bit her lip. She knew they'd done well, better than many, but the knock on that wall was driving her crazy.

"Jessie! Jessieeee!" Jessie looked up to

see her father running towards her. His eyes were lit up with absolute pride and joy. "That was *fantastic*! I've never seen you ride so well!"

"But we chipped the wall," Jessie protested, surprised. They hadn't done *that* well, had they? Jessie had done much better rounds at home, practicing.

"I'm not talking about that," her father said. "I'm talking about the way you rode Bailey! It was like there was a hidden connection between you two. He did everything you asked him to, and he seemed to practically float above the ground. I've never seen anyone, ever, ride their horse with so much passion, love, and dedication. It's obvious he can feel how much you do for him. You two rode like you were one being, flying up into heaven."

Jessie was overwhelmed by these words, and looked down to Bailey's neck. He stretched around and nibbled her boot, but Jessie swore she could see a glint in his eye. The good kind of glint. The kind of glint people have when they've been to heaven and back again. 



White

By Dylan Sherman



Dylan Sherman, 10
Seattle, Washington

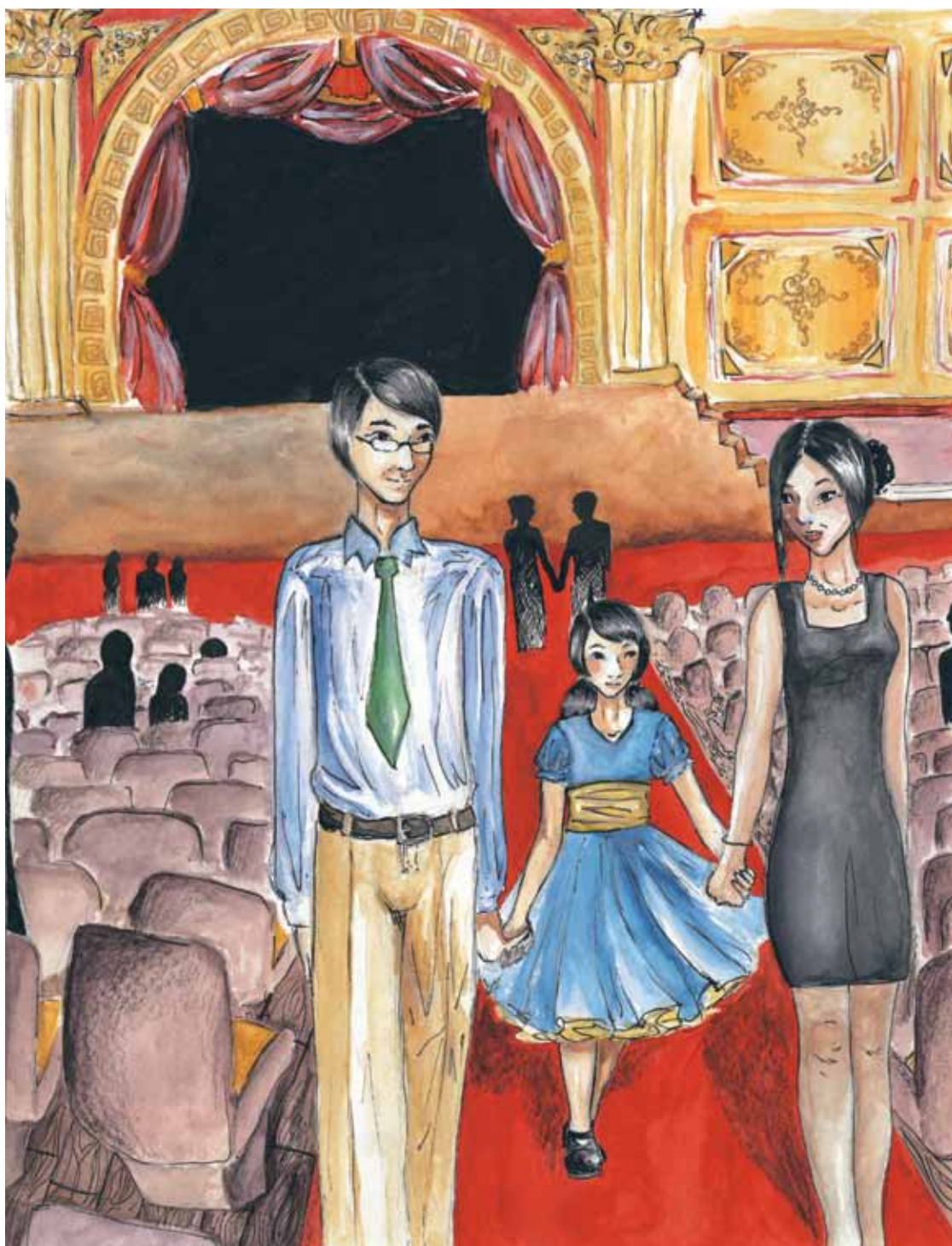
White is the color of
Beautiful

Like a dove
Soaring over a forgotten mountain lake
Snow
Blanketing the landscape
In a soft white
Paradise
Essence of pine

Like a cello's music
Sweeping the night
Alone
But that makes it even more
Serene

Like a white sail
Rising up a mast
Against a coral blue sea
Waving about
Taking
You there

Like a patch
Of white roses
Among the ashes
The start
Of new life



The show is over, but the feeling is not, and my bliss cannot be contained

The Balance

By **Kia Okuma**

Illustration by **Catherine Winings**

EVERY TIME I would go to the opera with my parents I would hum along to the songs, quietly, barely audible in the din of shuffles, shifting, coughing, and the occasional round of applause. Even when my lovely serenade finished I would continue along with the song. Both my parents would look down from either side of me and smile gently. Then they would shift their attention back to the show, smile never wavering. This was my zone, and I sank into a peaceful oblivion, humming, bobbing my head back and forth, my eyes closed. The show was not my interest, but the music. It flows from the mouth, vibrates and radiates energy and happiness, or tearing sadness, infuriating madness, calm comfort. The mood of the singer, the artist, cannot be hidden when they are emitting their beautiful song. They are exposed in the most beautiful way, and I yearn to drink in more. I soak up the music like a dehydrated and dying child, and bask in the sunlight. The show is over, but the feeling is not, and my bliss cannot be contained. Now I am the happiest person in the world, and we return to our house. I sleep peacefully, for this is the peace-keeping, which somehow steadies the world, balances, and keeps all in equality. This is the truth, and all this keeps me going until the next time I enter that ornamented theater, slip into my seat, and all I ever wish for in my frenzied state is granted. ❁



Kia Okuma, 12
Minneapolis, Minnesota

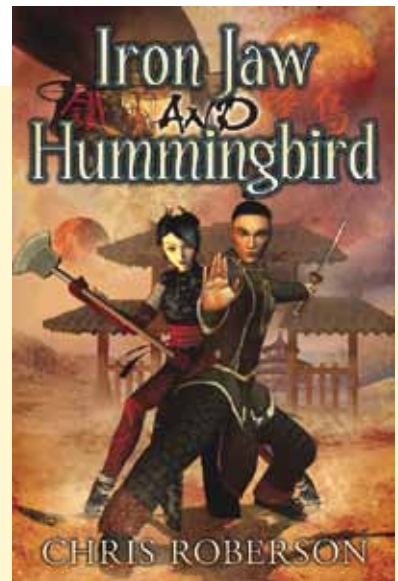


Catherine Winings, 13
Manassas, Virginia

Book Review

By Ryan McManaman

Iron Jaw and Hummingbird, by Chris Roberson;
Viking Children's Books: New York, 2008;
\$19.99



Ryan McManaman, 12
Lincoln, Nebraska

WHAT IF THE CHINESE had taken over the whole eastern hemisphere when Christopher Columbus left Spain in 1492? And what if this military and cultural expansion eventually led to the Chinese colonization of Mars? This alternate history sets the scene in Chris Roberson's *Iron Jaw and Hummingbird*.

This book is a unique blend of science fiction and history. Chris Roberson bases the main conflict on the actual Chinese Boxer Rebellion from the late 1800s. For instance, the name of the religious uprising on Mars is the Society of Righteous Harmony; during the Boxer Rebellion a similar group called itself the Righteous Harmony Society Movement.


Chris Roberson's dramatic story features adventure with a dash of romance. The main characters are a thirteen-year-old girl, Gamine (Iron Jaw), and a sixteen-year-old boy, Huang (Hummingbird). Huang, a failed scholar, is forced by his influential parents to join the Army of the Green Standard as an officer. But before he reaches his post, bandits attack his caravan and capture him as a slave or, as the bandits say, their *pet*. Despite his slavery, he empathizes with the bandits against the Governor-General. Gamine's life changes from that of a pampered scholar

to a wandering con artist on the whim of her aristocratic mistress, Madame Chauviteau-Zong. After three years of cons she joins a religious movement for food and shelter. After a while she becomes the leader by posing as a holy person through whom the “powers” speak. This gives her a chance to get back at the society that cast her out. Interestingly, the characters’ stories don’t converge until over halfway through the book. Both Huang and Gamine live lives on the run. When they finally meet, they decide to quit running. United by a common goal, they plan a coup against the corrupt Governor-General.

Another distinct element of the book is the realistic characterization. Almost all of the other characters have a history, which makes them feel more genuine. For example, the bandits seem like classic bad guys, but when you learn they used to be miners with dangerous working conditions, they seem more like people, not bloodthirsty criminals.

I can relate to Huang because he likes to think things through and not rely on impulse, and he eventually becomes the bandits’ chief tactician. Also, he and I share a hobby: chess. While Huang plays a different version called “elephant chess,” it’s the same concept. We’ve all felt guilt before, so I think we can all relate to Gamine. She never stops feeling guilty about the victims she scams. She tries to make amends by leading her people to better lives.

Despite the plot and character strengths, the end was disappointing. I won’t tell you what it is, but if the audience sees a large meat cleaver on a table during a play, they expect somebody to use the meat cleaver. Don’t just sum it up with a butchered pig on the table in the next scene.

I would recommend this book because, even though it takes place on Mars, it seems like the story could happen anywhere. With a strong plot and realistic characters, I really cared about what happened to everyone. 



Living in a trailer park probably would be cool if you were some rich kid on summer vacation

Stranger

By **Emma Dudley**

Illustrated by **Charlie Jones**

WHAT IF IT WASN'T like this? I thought for the trillionth time in my life. No, probably more than a trillion. Maybe the google-plexth time? Windsnap was such a bad school I didn't even know what came after trillion. I was pretty sure that it wasn't google-plex though. I sat on the steps leading up to the trailer I lived in and tossed a big chunk of gravel against the chain-link fence that was our backyard.

I sighed and grabbed my rusty old beach bike from where it was leaning against the dented metal of the trailer and swung my leg over the seat.

"Going out, Gram," I yelled to my grandma. I saw her wave her hand through the screen window from where she was chopping up vegetables. I started pedaling along the gravel around our trailer, the dirt road that led from each row of trailers, and then out of the trailer park and down the beach road.

Living in a trailer park probably would be cool if you were some rich kid on summer vacation staying there for three days. Heck, a week. But not when you've lived there for ten years straight with no trips to break it up. And not when you're living on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where a hurricane could sneak up and obliterate your life. My grandma, my little sister, Tally, and I don't have a car either. If there was a big hurricane, there would be nothing for us to do. Sure, they would evacuate everyone, but we didn't have a car. And all of us on one bicycle was not happening. My bike is my prized possession. I found it



Emma Dudley, 13
Berkeley, California



Charlie Jones, 13
Tukwila, Washington

when I was seven, six years ago. It looked as though someone had just dropped it in front of one of the spiffy beach houses along the shore and thrown a sign that said "Free" in sharpie on top of it. It was really big for me then, but I wheeled it all the way back to the trailer and showed it to Gram.

"That's real nice, Gale," she'd said to me.

"That's an ugly bike for an ugly big brother," Tally had laughed.

So that was that. The bike had stayed with me, and by now it was too small. My gangly legs bent almost up to my chest when I pedaled, and I had to lean down to hold onto the handlebars. It worked though, and that was what mattered. Whenever the other teenagers on vacation stared at me, I just pretended not to notice. I must have been a sight, my white-blond hair streaming behind me, my torn-up too-small shorts and my T-shirt with the sleeves cut off.

As I rode by all the fancy beach houses, I thought it again: It didn't always used to be like this. Come on. Why was I even thinking this still after all these years? *Because you don't want to forget.* That was true. I had a great memory. Even a few years after I moved to the trailer park I could still remember my life before I was three... My parents, cool clothes, our colossal house a few feet away from the ocean with shutters for the windows (no hurricane problems!), and a nice car. My parents had left for a drive one night and never came back. I had outgrown my cool

clothes. The house was sold when Tally and I moved in with Gram for money. The car was totaled along with Mom and Dad.

But for a while now, the memories had been getting blurry. Fuzzy around the edges. I was beginning to forget Life Before Trailer. What my room had been like, the clothes I had worn, the school I went to... even what my parents had been like. Tally didn't remember at all. She had only been a year old when our lives had changed. Sometimes I envied her, sometimes I pitied her for not remembering. I tried to tell her stories, and I asked Gram to tell too, but she didn't like to. She missed Mom and Dad as much as we did.

There was nothing to do about it, though. I could still remember a lot, and that would have to be enough. I screeched to a halt in front of the path leading to the beach. I picked up my bike and carried it across the sand before I set it down where I kicked off my flip-flops. Sand was bad for the chain, and it wasn't like I could snap my fingers and a brand new bike would appear. I sat down in the sand and watched the families playing in the surf. I liked to watch them and pretend I was one of them. Get handed a towel by my mom, get swung around in the water by my dad...

I missed my old life, true, but I had gotten used to it just being Gram and Tally along for the ride with me. I loved them, and we got along. I went to school, had a bike, the trailer park had a pool, granted the bottom paint was peeling and the tiles around it were loose, and I lived

right by the beach. But there was just something... like I didn't belong here. If you don't feel like you belong, then tough luck, I thought. Where else is there to belong to? This thought brought me back to the story about my name. I had always hated my name, Gale. Everyone at school had laughed when I'd told it to them. "Isn't Gale a *girl's* name?" I remember someone jeering when I was five. Girly Gale had been my nickname throughout grade school.

One afternoon after being bullied all day I came home to the trailer and shouted to Gram, "Why did I have to be named Gale? Gale is a *girl's* name. I'm a boy! *I am not Girly Gale!*" Gram had come into the room and handed me a glass of milk and sat with me at the table.

"You were named Gale because your parents liked the name. It's a boy's name too, hon. Did you know that Gale means *stranger?*"

Stranger, I had thought. *I am* a stranger. I've never really belonged. From then on I liked my name. I had never thought a name could be so dead on. I ignored the teasing and bullying, and like all teasing and bullying, when ignored it wasn't nearly as effective.

My thoughts kept roaming wild while I sat looking at the families on the beach. Then, all of sudden, a boy who looked about my age came up to me.

"Nice bike you got there. It's an old Roadmaster, huh? Kinda rusty, but still looks pretty good." The kid had buzzed brown hair and black eyes. He also had a

line of freckles under his eyes. He was carrying a skimboard and his swim trunks looked designer.

"Yeah, Roadmaster. Thanks." Nobody ever seemed to pay attention to me at the beach. It was a new experience, being noticed. I kind of liked it.

"I'm Thayne."

This was the part where I should say, "Hey, I'm Gale," but I was reluctant. Maybe as soon as Thayne heard my strange name he would decide I was a complete loser and walk away. I couldn't exactly say my last name... it was Monsuno. What kind of guy is named Monsuno? A weirdo guy, that's who. No offense to any kids out there named Monsuno. Thayne was looking at me expectantly. "Gale," I sighed.

"Well, I just moved here from Washington. Guess I'll see you around, Gale." He shifted his skimboard to his other arm and walked away down the beach.

Whoa. He didn't even bat an eyelash at my name. Thayne seemed cool. He seemed like a no-nonsense kind of guy, and I liked people like that. I didn't really have any friends, and it might make me feel better about being poor and having no parents. Maybe it would make me feel less like a stranger.

THAT NIGHT, after dinner, I lay on the top bunk of the bed Tally and I shared. I stared up at the picture I had taped right above my bed. It was a picture of the house that I used to live in, the house that I rode by every day so that I

could engrave it in my memory. The house was big, with wooden stairs leading up on one side. It was painted light blue, and had a deck that went all the way around the perimeter. It was right on the beach. I had taken that picture a few years ago and had stared at it every night until I went to sleep since then. I knew every millimeter of that picture of the house. Every night I wished as I stared at that picture that one day I would be able to go inside again. See what I remembered from my past life.

I stared and stared until my eyes watered from not blinking. Soon I could hear Tally's light snoring below me. I sighed and closed my eyes. I wanted... no I *needed* to see the inside of that house at least one more time.

THE NEXT DAY I sat with Tally at the card table in the kitchenette. Gram was at the convenience store where she worked. Gram loved working at the store. She had worked there and lived in the trailer park as long as I could remember. That was one of the reasons I almost never mentioned out loud how much I hated living here. I knew that sometimes she felt like Tally and I deserved better, but whenever she started to say so I waved her off. "We have a beach and a pool. What more could two kids want?" She'd ruffle my hair and give Tally a hug. Gram was the best grandma anyone could ever hope for.

"Do you want to hang out at the pool today?" Tally was eleven. She loved to swim. She had long white-blond hair like

me, which she wore in a ponytail.

"Maybe. I got some stuff to do today."

"Like *what*? Have you noticed it's summer vacation, Gale? Now's the time to have nothing to do!"

"Yeah, sure. I met this cool kid at the beach yesterday and I wanna see if I can catch him again."

"Mmmmm," muttered Tally, picking up the comic section in the newspaper. I rolled my eyes. Tally had a ton of friends at school.

"See you," I said, rinsing off my bowl and putting it in the sink. I picked up my bike where it was resting against the side of the trailer and rode down to the beach. Again, I carried it to my usual spot and looked around. There he was. Thayne was down by the water skimboarding. I picked up my bike again and lugged it nearer, leaving it where the dry sand stopped and the wet began. Thayne stood with his back to me, waiting for a good wave to ride.

"Hey," I said. Thayne turned around.

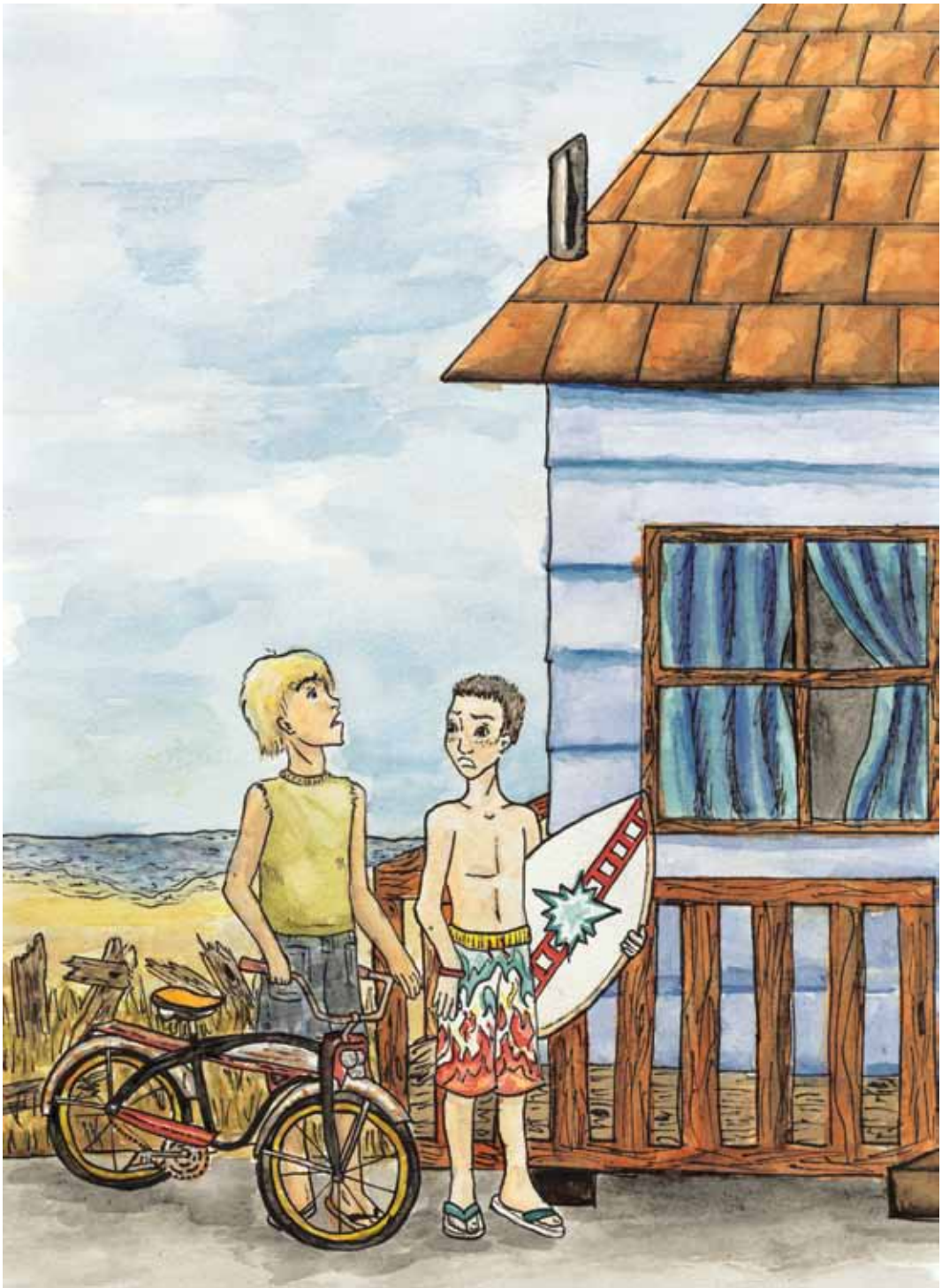
"Oh, hey. What's up?"

"Nothing much... just biked down here to hang out. You?"

"Skimboarding. It's really fun. You want to try?" He held out the board.

I looked down. I hadn't changed into my trunks at the trailer and still wore my jean shorts that stopped above my knees. Suddenly I was self-conscious. I probably looked like a total nerd. "OK. I've never really done it before though, so don't expect anything awesome."

"It's cool. Just run, drop the board, run



"Th- this is your new house?"

until you catch up with it, and jump on.” I nodded. I’d sat on this beach for ten summers and seen tons of skimboarders. I took the board from him.

I waited until the wave had washed out and the sand had just a thin coating of water on it, ran, dropped the board and jumped on with both my feet. The board was fast. I rode down the beach until I got to where *a huge wave was breaking*. Uh-oh. A huge wave was breaking. The board ran up the wave and as it peaked, I was catapulted up into the air and belly-flopped into the surf.

I came up, spluttering and gasping for air. That was graceful. Thayne had picked up his board and was walking toward me. He held out his hand out.

“That was *awesome!* You got like ten feet of air!” He laughed.

I took a deep breath as he pulled me up. “Wow. That was... fun?”

Thayne laughed again. “Want to do it again?”

“Sure,” I laughed. It *was* fun.

After a couple of hours of swimming and boarding Thayne suggested that we go over to his house.

“It’s a pretty nice house. And I just got everything unpacked in my room. We can walk from here.”

“Sure,” I said. Thayne was nice, and my alternative was pretending to be an Olympic swimming commentator for my little sister.

We walked along the beach road, me rolling my bike next to me. “I’m soaked,” I realized. I didn’t really want to jeopardize

my only friendship in my life by getting someone’s new house all wet.

“It’s cool. A beach house is going to get sandy and salty at one point or another.” He handed me his towel so that I could mop up my shaggy hair and clothes. After about five minutes of walking, Thayne stopped in front of a house.

“Th- this is your new house?” I asked.

“Yeah. What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.” We walked up the wooden stairs and into the house. It was big. It had a hall leading to a living room, with doors branching off into other rooms. The kitchen was pristine, the bedrooms clean, and the floors were spotless. Thayne opened a door and walked in.

“This is my room,” he said proudly. “My family moved here because of my dad’s job... the only downside is that we won’t be here for long.” All I could do was nod. “Gale? You sure you’re OK?”

My eyes were starting to get red. “I... I have to go,” I mumbled and fled out of the room. Thayne ran after me.

“Wait! Gale! *Gale!*” But I was already jumping on my bike and pushing off from the driveway. I wiped my eyes and pedaled as fast as I could away from the house that marked what had been.

I HAD THOUGHT I could handle it. But I hadn’t been able to. I had remembered every moment of my old life when I saw the rooms. And when I had seen Thayne’s posters and junk all over *my* room, that had just made it unbear-

able. I was mad at Thayne, but most of all I was mad at myself. Of course no one nice would ever show interest in being my friend. I was a loser. An outcast. I narrowed my eyes as I pumped down street after street, back to where I belonged.

I pulled next to our trailer and dropped my bike. "Wanna go swimming?" I yelled at Tally. She opened the screen door and looked out with wide eyes.

"Have you been *crying*? And why are you all wet?"

"Do you want to go swimming?" I said through my teeth.

"Uh... sure?" Tally went inside and emerged again, this time in her swimsuit. "Aren't you going to change?"

"Already wet." Tally raised her eyebrows but didn't say anything, walking with me to the pool.

The next few days I forced myself to stay in the park. I would chuck pebbles at the fence, do cannonballs into the pool, ride my bike along the gravel. One night as I lay in bed I looked up at the picture as I had for so many nights. But this time I glared at it angrily and tore it down. I held it in my hand for a few seconds before tearing it up and flushing the pieces down the toilet.

I felt lonelier than ever. I didn't have anyone to talk to about my problems; I didn't want to worry Gram, and Tally probably wouldn't care. A week after visiting my old house I sat on the top of the fence, facing the busy main road where cars were rushing by. All those people were going somewhere. To work. To sum-

mer camp. To the beach. To their home. Where was I going? Was I going to stay in the park my whole life? I didn't want that. But what *did* I want? Did I want to be like Thayne? Not really. Where would Tally and I go when Gram was gone? So many questions, and not nearly enough answers.

"Hey." I spun around and found myself looking down into a pair of jet-black eyes with freckles beneath them. What was *he* doing here? Why wasn't he trashing my old house? When I didn't say anything back, he looked down where he was shuffling his feet in the gravel. "Look, I know you probably want to be alone or whatever, but... Listen, I'm sorry I upset you the other day. I don't really know what happened. Maybe... you could help me understand?"

"I don't think you would."

"You'll never know if you don't try." He swung himself up onto the fence next to me. I didn't know what to do. He was just waiting there, staring at me.

"First of all, how did you even know I lived here?"

Thayne smiled. "I ran after you when you took off on your bike. You were going like fifty miles per hour!" I had to laugh a little at that one. My legs were still sore. I took a deep breath and started explaining.

I told him about my parents. How I had lived in his house. What my room, now his, had looked like. How I thought my parents abandoned us. Moving in with Gram in the park. Taking the picture. Longing to go inside the house. Being bul-

lied about my name, clothes, and money. And finally I told him how I was confused about everything. How I didn't know what was going to happen to my life from here, and what I wanted to happen. When I finally stopped he was looking straight ahead at the cars honking and racing by. We were silent for a long time.

"I'm confused too," he finally said. "Of course I don't have it horrible," he continued. "I have parents, a great house," he smiled at me apologetically, "and I have a good amount of money. But my dad's job moves around every two years. I finally get settled in a house and then it's, "Honey, time to pack up again." I've never had a best friend. I know that a lot of kids are like that but... that doesn't make it less hard." I nodded. Before I had met Thayne, if a rich kid had tried to compare their problems to mine I probably would have laughed so hard I fell over. But this was different. I was finally realizing that it wasn't how your life turned out that determined who you were... it was what you did when your life spun you around and deposited you in a strange place. What you did when you were a stranger.

"I guess life just isn't perfect," I said.

"I guess," agreed Thayne. "What a breakthrough!" He laughed. And the funny thing was, I found myself laughing with him. And I laughed so hard I fell off the fence. That just made him laugh hard-

er, and he landed on the gravel next to me.

If Tally had been watching us through the trailer window, she probably would have said, "A dumbo friend for a dumbo brother."

THAYNE AND I became inseparable after what we called our "breakthrough." We spent every summer day together, hanging out at the trailer park, his house, or the beach, and we knew we had each finally found a best friend. Then, one day, the summer when we were both fifteen, Thayne met me at the beach at the usual time.

"So guess what," he said, without expression. "I'm moving again." He stared at the sand at his feet.

"Man," was all I could think to say.

"Got an email?" he asked.

"Got a trailer address," I said. Thayne nodded. "How long have you got?"

"Two weeks."

I picked up some sand and threw it into the water. "Well... then let's make the best of it," I said, punching him lightly in the arm. He smiled.

We walked along the beach together, thinking about different things. We were going to lose each other, but not what would be left behind from us. We walked along the beach together, the waves leaving shallow holes where our footprints had been.



A New Brother

By **Ryan Sparks**

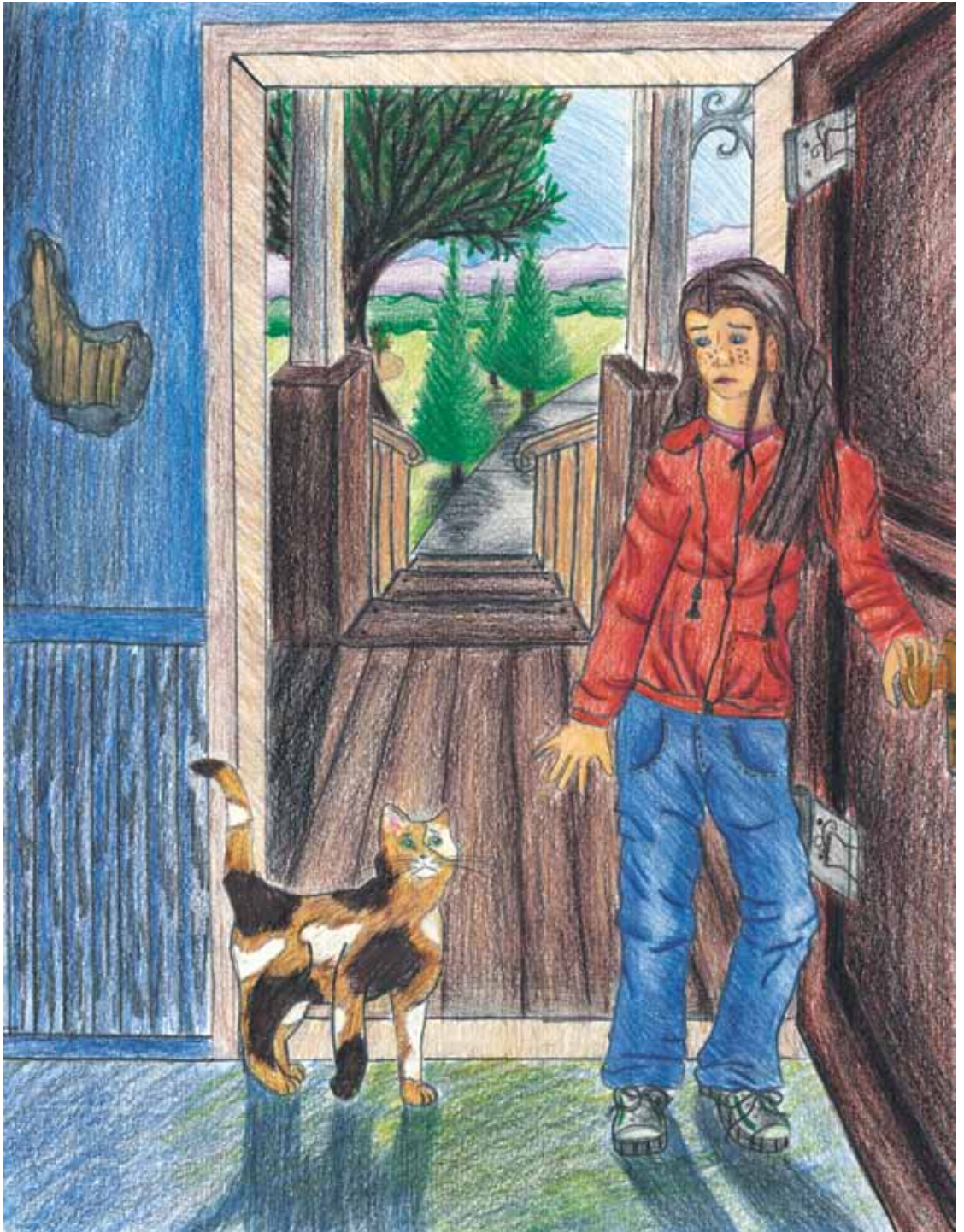
There he was
Such a tiny person
I looked at him
Sleeping peacefully

Suddenly his eyes open
Brand new brown eyes
Staring at me
Blinking and adjusting his eyes to a new experience
Light

His mind consuming
New thoughts
New faces
New world
New everything
He is a new person



Ryan Sparks, 12
Kansas City, Missouri



Liesa saw the confusion in Chloe's eyes as the elderly cat viewed what had once been her home

Where the Heart Is

By Amanda Valdovinos

Illustrated by the author

WALKING THROUGH the old, silent house was like walking through one of the photo albums in the big wooden chest in Liesa's room. It pulsed with the heartbeat of memories as time stood perfectly still.

Liesa's thoughts echoed in her mind as the cool, dark house danced with shadows from the sun flitting through the trees outside the windows.

It looked so... empty.

Liesa had been told weeks ago that this ancient house would be vacant soon, that it was eventually going to be demolished because of its age. Back then, the effects of the move hadn't quite sunk in. But now they had.

Gone. The word was a common thread tying all the rooms together. Each one complained of its own losses. *The television used to be here*, reminded the living room—and *the coffee table used to rest there*. The old rolltop desk, always full of uncharted jungles of junk, had made the big indent on the carpet. How much bigger the room felt without it! Liesa continued tracing an invisible map in her head. Here—by the door. This was where the lamp stand had been situated. She remembered how often their dog would knock it over as he bounded, barking, across the room to the window seat to watch Liesa's little sisters and brothers come home from school, day after day. Liesa smiled at the memory.

Moving like a shadow through the familiar rooms, Liesa touched each familiar object—a small nail hole, a crack on the wall that resembled the state of Idaho—trying to absorb every



Amanda Valdovinos, 13
Damascus, Oregon

part of this finely detailed scene.

In the kitchen, Liesa was greeted by an empty floor where the table used to be, the table around which she had sat with various people over the years—quiet grandmas bent over their latest crossword puzzles and knitting projects, loud groups of school friends, little siblings conversing over breakfast or struggling with homework alone into the afternoon.

In this house, everything had its place, Liesa realized. Take one thing away and the jigsaw puzzle is incomplete forever. The china cabinet, the coat rack, the comfy bright blue sofa; everything seemed to have a meaning. They all seemed to fit perfectly together to create a gentle rhythm, like the steady beat of a song or the carefully chosen words of a poem, all jumbled together to form a perfect verse that didn't have to rhyme. Without each other, something would be missing forever.

Liesa could hear the dull hum of the truck outside. She had to go soon. The faint voices of her family drifted inside, sounding happy and eager to be off.

Nobody seemed to miss this house. Nobody seemed to care except Liesa. True, it was an old-fashioned, well worn home, but that was why she liked it. It had so much more character; so much more meaning... it almost seemed to be like a living person—different, one of a kind.

As Liesa reached the base of the rickety stairs, she turned away. She couldn't go up. She couldn't go and see the room she

spent the first half of her life in, not when it was going to be demolished soon. It was time for something new—a new room, a new home.

The sounds of the happy commotion outside grew louder, gently beckoning Liesa to leave the silent solitude of the hollow, empty home.

Just a few more minutes, she silently begged, looking out across the backyard. Where were the little maple tree saplings her father had planted when they had moved in, years ago? Where were the tiny shoots, the bare fields? They had all grown since then. Before her mind's eye, she saw in a moment every soccer game, sunset picnic, every sunlit afternoon spent underneath the old oak tree. She remembered every game with her brothers and sisters that had led them beyond the short stone wall into the ocean-like fields of grain beyond. Liesa sighed, turning away.

Just then, something in the doorway caught her attention.

The little white-and-brown-spotted cat stood staring at Liesa, its wise, green eyes piercing Liesa's thoughts.

"Chloe," Liesa breathed, the sound of the name echoing through the bare room. Immediately a warm sense of familiarity washed over her.

Chloe had been there since Liesa was little and had watched Liesa grow up and leave childhood behind. The wise old cat had been there through good and bad times, always offering a gentle purr or an affectionate rub to those who needed it.

Liesa saw the confusion in Chloe's eyes as the elderly cat viewed what had once been her home. Where was her cat bed, her warm hearth rug, or the comfy armchair on which so many winter days had been spent napping?

"Oh, Chloe." Liesa knelt and buried her face in Chloe's warm, sweet fur. The scent was a familiar one, one that seemed to linger in the back of Liesa's memory. Tears, laughter, storms, sunny afternoons—Chloe had silently observed them all, never saying anything, never being noticed.

Liesa carried Chloe outside onto the sunlit porch. Setting her down, she locked the front door, sealing off her old memories and beginning a new journey to a place she'd call home.

Chloe looked confusedly at the tightly closed door as Liesa started down the porch steps, then scratched lightly on its rough wood. Liesa shook her head, trying to pry the cat off of the doorstep,

but it was clear that Chloe was reluctant to leave the beloved place where she had been born.

"Come on," Liesa said softly, trying to coax her away. She tried to sound reassuring, but how could she comfort Chloe if, deep down, she really felt exactly the same way?

"Liesa, everything's ready. Got the house key?" Liesa heard her mother call from the trunk of the blue minivan.

"Got it," she replied, holding up the key before shoving it in her pocket.

Gently, carefully, she lifted Chloe off the welcome mat and hugged her close for one of their last moments together in front of the large house.

Liesa pictured their shiny new house in Montana and the beautiful fields and forests surrounding it. It was waiting for them, calling to them from far away over the mountains.

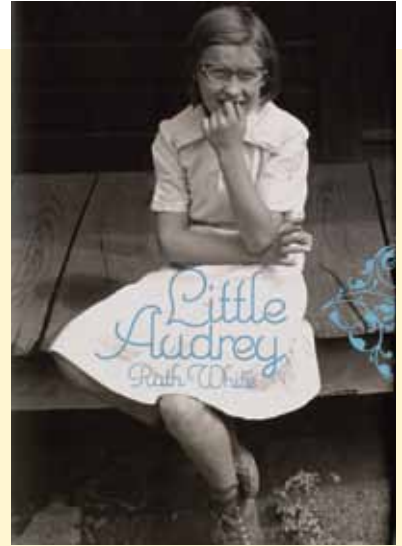
"Come on, Chloe, old girl," she whispered, "Let's go home." ❁



Book Review

By Alaina Stout

Little Audrey, by Ruth White; Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2008; \$16



Alaina Stout, 9
New Albany, Ohio

I NEVER IMAGINED that people could live in a coal mining camp until I read *Little Audrey*. Author Ruth White brings this unimaginable existence to life in her latest work.

Audrey White is a sickly eleven-year-old girl growing up with her mother, three sisters and father in a Virginia camp during 1948. The cover's photograph of a young girl in glasses and worn dress lets readers know right away that this is a tale of poverty and limitation.


The story is not one imagined by the author. Ms. White was herself a little girl living in the coal mining town of Jewell Valley, Virginia, during the late 1940s. It was there that she began creating her first stories of hardship that can be later found in works such as *Sweet Creek Holler* or *Way Down Deep*. Each novel featured a plucky young girl who would not let personal circumstances get her down. For Audrey, her only wish is "for us to live a better life than we do."

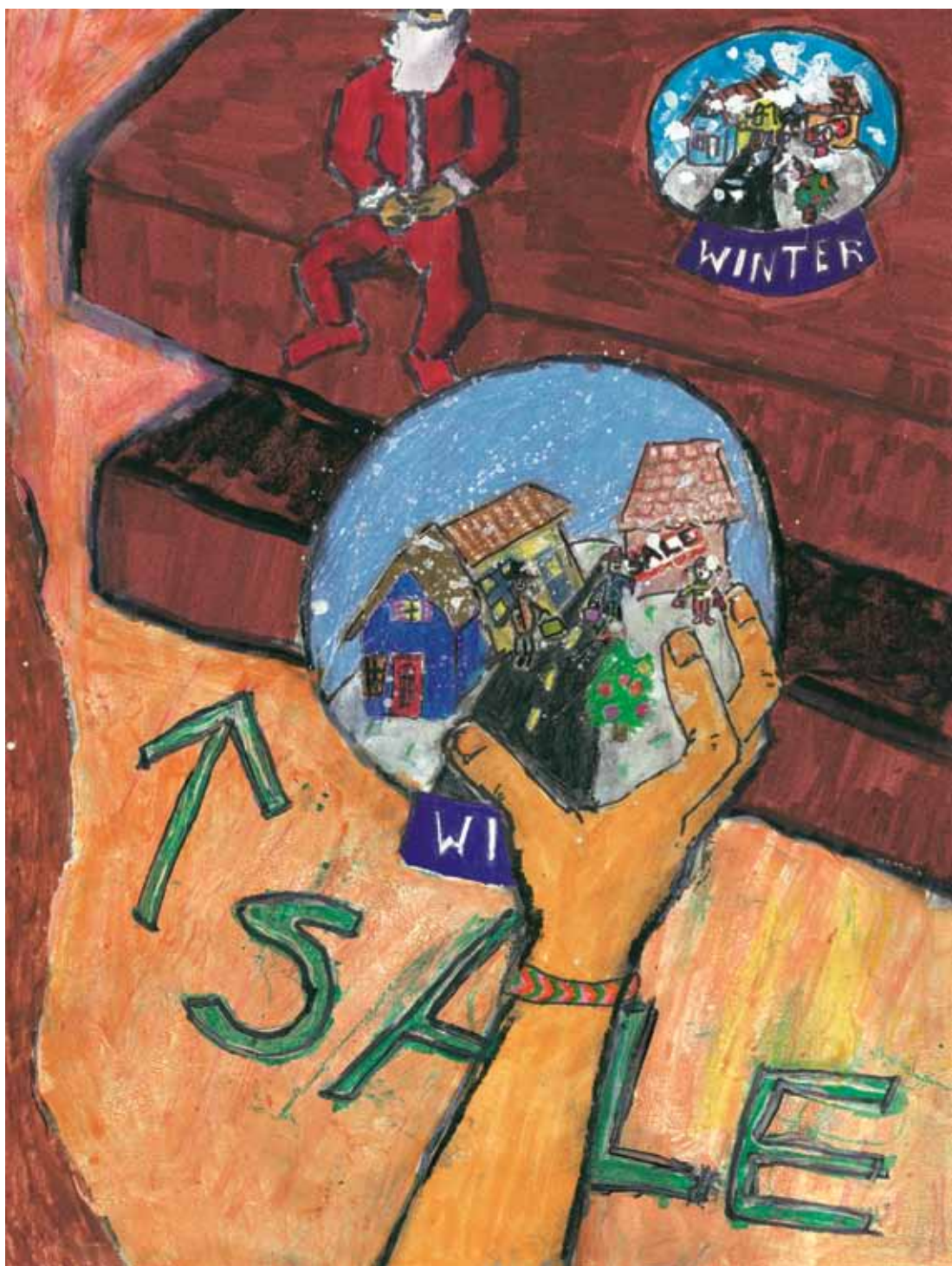
I had the unique opportunity to ask the author about the main character. Ms. White indicated that Audrey was, in reality, her older sister. "I got into her head as best as I could and told our story from her point of view," she explained. "Laura Ingalls

Wilder was my first inspiration and most important influence so, like her, I have tried to tell my life story through a series of fiction books.”

After meeting Audrey, the reader discovers the camp’s schoolhouse and other barefoot children who live in similar desperation. But Audrey’s problems are much less the mining camp surroundings than her family and their troubled lives. Audrey’s mother cannot overcome the death of a sibling after childbirth, and her father is one of the town’s well-known drunks who works just enough to support the family and his drinking. Life does go on in other normal ways as well: cakes are baked, Shirley Temple movies are all the rage at the camp theater, there are walks along country roads with school friends, and paper cups of Coca-Cola are handed out at the company store.

This day-to-day pace carries on through most of the short novel until the sudden, tragic death of Audrey’s father in a car accident. His death is bittersweet for Audrey, her mother and sisters as it creates a new life for the family outside the camp. Audrey’s wish to live a better life has come true, but at a cost that was unimaginable early in the novel. This is where the story abruptly ends and the reader is left waiting to learn of the opportunities that will greet Audrey in the larger world. Perhaps Ms. White has left this for a future novel on her family.

Little Audrey is a touching story and there are many lessons to be learned, mainly that good things can happen during bad times. I liked this book because of Ms. White’s decision to write a personal story about her own life, regardless of its circumstances, instead of choosing to write fiction or other more popular genres. The voice that Ms. White creates for Audrey is both believable and sad, and I recommend this book to anyone who has experienced hardship, as well as those who have not. 



I let out a reluctant sigh and take one last glance at the joyful, snowy town

Longing

By **Emily Schneider**

Illustrated by **Charlotte Eisenberg**

PEARLY WHITE CRYSTALS flutter gently around the buildings and houses, covering the town in a delicate sheet of snow. The soothing silvery color of the snowflakes contrasts beautifully with the somber blues and greens of the busy streets and malls. Pedestrians scramble across the streets in bustling pods to grab last-minute Christmas presents. Giant evergreen trees, decorated ever so carefully, light up the concrete pathways with multi-colored ornaments, making it almost impossible to feel anything but joy. Cars and buses slide along the icy roads, slipping mindlessly with not a care in the world. In every store there is a different Christmas carol echoing through the racks of clothes and the toy-covered shelves. A luminescent smile spreads across everyone's face. Anticipation for the blissful holiday to soon arrive once again fills the minds and bodies of every little boy and girl within blocks. Snowmen rest peacefully in what is now a blanket of white, with their scarves and gloves to keep them warm during the chilly winter evening.

My mother's voice calls to me from across the store, waking me from my reverie, "Come on. We have to go home to prepare Christmas Eve dinner." I let out a reluctant sigh and take one last glance at the joyful, snowy town. I softly stroke the glass that separates their world from mine, shake the globe lightly, and then hesitantly reposition it back on the shelf. Running to catch up with my mother, I bound out the door and into the blazing California heat. ❁



Emily Schneider, 13
Grand Rapids, Michigan



Charlotte Eisenberg, 12
Peaks Island, Maine

The Brown- and-White Tabby

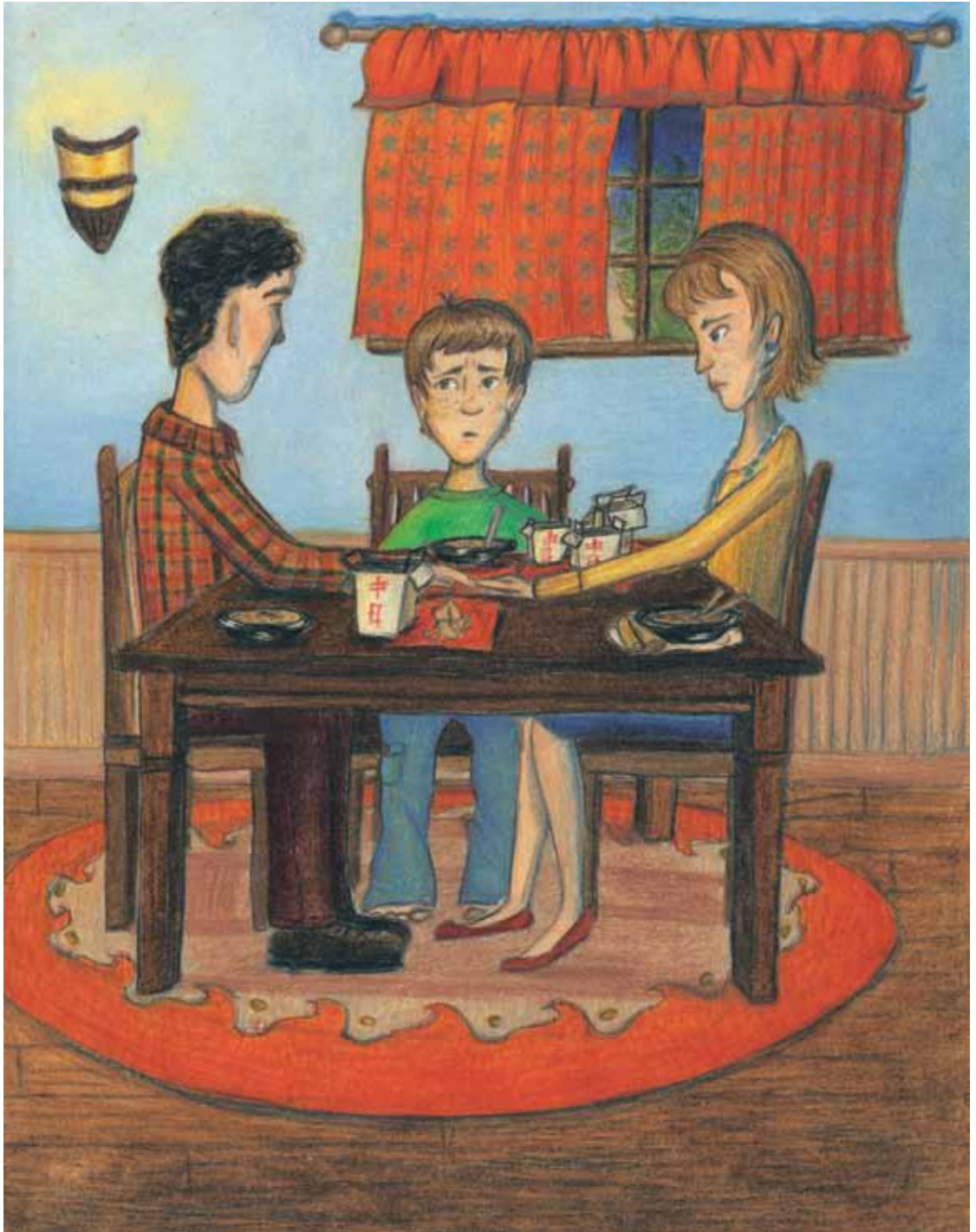
By Mia Ba-Lu Hildebrandt



Mia Ba-Lu Hildebrandt, 12
Glen Ridge, New Jersey

I leave for school,
Strolling with my mother.
My tiny pink backpack is slung over my shoulder.
It is a crisp, autumn day.
All the leaves
Changing pigments.
My mother
Constantly reminding me to
Walk faster.
To keep up with her,
I drag my little feet along.
Into the dirt they go...
And there! As I round the next corner,
I hear a faint tinkling.
It's not my imagination. I spin around
And lay my eyes on it!
Yes! It's a brown-and-white tabby!
Mother scolds, "Mia, keep walking.
You get so distracted over little things in life."

As our walk progresses,
I still hear the tinkling, sweet little bells ringing
 from the kitty's neck.
Every few seconds I turn my head around,
Checking to see if the tabby is still there,
And it is.
As I check back one last time, my mother says,
"Mia, we're here at Linden. Hurry up,
Or you'll be late!"
"Bye, kitty!"
See you tomorrow!"



"Jason, your father's job is being moved to California"

Bad Dinner

By Adam Jacobs

Illustrated by Emma Hoppough

WE'RE EATING CHINESE tonight. Dark plastic bowls filled with rice and vegetables, egg rolls in little cardboard boxes, even the fortune cookies with the lottery numbers on the back of the paper. This is a real treat. Mom doesn't care for Chinese food, but it's Dad's favorite, so tonight she's putting up with it. In case you hadn't guessed, I kind of like it, too. I crammed about six pieces of sweet-and-sour chicken in my mouth and smiled at Mom. She forced herself to smile back. I could tell she wasn't into the food tonight.

Dad reached his hand across the table. Mom placed her hand over his, stroking it gently. I've never seen them do that before. "Jason," said Mom, "you love your father, don't you?"

"Um... of course. Why?"

"And your father loves you more than anything else in the world," Mom continued. Dad nodded his head. "He wants you to grow up to be the best that you can be."

"Mom?"

"But sometimes, when you grow up, you have to make decisions that aren't... easy." I could tell Mom was softening things up. But what was she getting at? Did I do something bad? Was there something wrong with Dad? Were they getting a divorce? I mean, they fight sometimes, but I never thought... "Your dad wishes there were more options, but sometimes there just aren't."

"Mom, please spit it out." I couldn't take it anymore. I



Adam Jacobs, 13
Brooklyn Park, Minnesota



Emma Hoppough, 13
Chico, California

thought this was going to be a great night. We ordered Chinese. The weather was getting nice. I was thinking about seeing a movie.

"Jason, your father's job is being moved to California."

I stared at Dad. He looked back at me, his eyes deep and soft. "You mean Dad's out of a job?" I asked.

"No, it's not like that. He's going to California, too."

"Wait! We're coming with, right?"

Dad looked sadder than I had seen him in years. He shook his head slowly, once to the left and once to the right. That's when I realized what was actually happening.

"Wait, why? Why do we have to stay here? I want to go with Dad!"

Dad swallowed and cleared his throat. "I wish there were another way, Jason, and if there was I would do it, but these are very difficult times and we *need* the money."

"Why can't Mom find a job?"

"There are *millions* of qualified people out there looking for work. We can't take that chance," Mom said. She put her hand on my shoulder. "I know we'll all miss having Dad around. But don't worry! He'll call us every night, and he'll still fly up here on holidays. Besides, it's only until we pay off the house."

"That's not the same! Why can't we just live off of welfare or something? We could get by! Isn't it worth it if we can keep Dad here?" I could hear myself getting angry before I knew it.

"We'd have to give up the house, which

is bad because we owe more than it's worth. We'd sell most of the furniture. We'd live in a small, dusty apartment in a bad neighborhood. We'd use food stamps and thrift stores to get by."

"So? You guys can handle that!" My voice quivered.

"It's not about us. It's about what's best for you."

I just about choked on a piece of chicken. "For me? It'd be best for me to have my mom and my dad in the same place!" Rice sputtered out of my mouth and stuck to the table. There was a moment of pause. Mom tilted her head to the floor, gripping Dad's hand tightly. I saw a tear rolling down her cheek. I felt guilty. Did I make her cry? Was she just sad that Dad's leaving? It felt a little unfair at the same time. It wasn't *my* fault that Dad was going away. Then I had another thought. "Dad, do you think they'll change their mind?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think if you ask real nice, they'll let you..." I trailed off because I felt stupid saying it, but I really *wished*...

"I already asked. They're very sorry."

That was the moment where it all felt real. There was no other way. It was going to happen. Mom and Dad just stared.

I stood up and left the table. I didn't know what I was going to do, I just thought, *I need to get away, I need to get away*. It was a stress-relief type thing. Sometimes I have to hit a pillow to get it all out. A pillow wasn't good enough, though. Pillows are soft and fluffy. I could

feel a panic setting in, but I didn't know where it was coming from. I spun around. I felt like screaming, but that wasn't much better than a pillow. I spun until I got too dizzy. Then I did something stupid.

I ran out the door as fast as I could. I didn't have any shoes. It was dark. It was *so* cold. The stress kept building up inside of me so I ran faster and faster, but it was no good. I thought about what my life would be like with Dad gone. He was always *there* for me. He drove me places. He gave me advice. He could talk to me about... I don't know, girls and stuff. I *need* that kind of support. In first grade, we learned the difference between needs and wants. Dad is a *need*. Money is a *want*.

I yelled at the top of my lungs, even though I knew it wasn't enough. My feet hurt really bad, but I didn't care. I thought about running forever and never coming back. I thought a lot of crazy things that I won't admit. My chest heaved in and out, forcing me to sprint faster. I couldn't see much, just dark rows of houses, and the road going out ahead of me. Miles and miles of suburban wasteland. I wanted to go away from the houses. Houses reminded me of home, and that's the last place I wanted to be.

I DECIDED TO STOP at the gas station. A guy in the back looked at me funny, but he didn't say anything. People at gas stations don't really care about much. Get your snacks. Gas up. Go. I forgot why I stopped here. Maybe I was just cold. I looked down at the tile. I could almost see

my reflection, if it weren't for the cracks in it. Gas stations are really depressing. I guess I fit right in.

I walked to the back of the snacks aisle and knocked on the bathroom door. No reply. I walked in and sat down on the only toilet, resting my face in my hands. I imagined how hard it must be for kids who only knew one parent. Was it more difficult if you had a chance to know them first? That thought only got me more depressed, and I looked around for something to take my mind off of things. Four walls. Lots of little tiles. Water on the floor under a tiny sink. I ripped off a square of toilet paper to make myself feel better. Then I ripped off another, just for the sake of it. I kept ripping until there was a huge pile of paper waste on the floor and the roll was almost gone.

I shoved them into the trash bin and walked back to the snack aisle. It felt good to waste stuff sometimes. I was tempted to throw some of the snacks in the trash, but then the store clerk would get mad at me. I could tell I was getting bored. Here I was, spinning my wheels at a gas station while my real problems were miles away back home.

I thought about my parents. I'd been gone for a few hours. They'd be worried about me. Maybe they were looking for me. I stumbled outside. There was a truck pulling away. I didn't like the way it smelled. I wished I could do something about it. I wish a lot of things. None of them would make that truck stop smelling. I plugged my nose instead.

I started thinking about Dad again. He loved me. I couldn't help that he was going away, but maybe if I plugged my nose... OK, bad analogy. But the thought got my brain working again. I didn't want Dad to feel bad. I wanted to make him proud, and I wanted him to be happy again. He was probably ripping his hair out now, trying to figure out where I was. I turned back towards home and ran.


I JOGGED BACK THROUGH my neighborhood. It was way past my curfew. All of the houses were dark. It was a welcoming environment. A couple of cars drove past me. I hoped it was no one I knew. I'm guessing I looked like a mess. My ears were freezing off, yet I was sweating at the same time. One of the cars turned on some extra lights. They were blue and red. "Hey!" yelled the cop. "Is your name Jason?"

Oh great. "Yeah."

"Are you eighteen?"

That's a weird question. I was tempted to say yes, but I suppose messing with a cop is a bad idea. "Not really."

"All right, get in the car, Jason. Let's get you home." I opened the back door. It was heavier than I expected. Or I was tired. I buckled myself in behind the driver. There was a wire mesh to separate us. I felt like a criminal. In light of that, I decided to ignore him if he said anything else. I have the right to remain silent.

We drove the remaining two blocks to the only house with lights on. The officer walked me to the door. He rang the bell and we waited. I snuck a peek at him. He looked pretty bored. He's probably looking for some extra cash, too, being out this late picking up kids. I hope someone pays him for bringing me home, even if it was only two blocks. I heard footsteps from inside and more lights flipped on. They rushed to the entryway. I knew who it would be. The door opened. I gave Dad a hug. 



Twenty-Six

By **Adrienne Hohensee**

Illustrated by **Athena Gerasoulis**

RAIN, TO GRACIE, had always seemed like the tears of hope. Instead of closing all the windows and playing board games, she walks half a mile to the nearest park. Running away from home was simple now. She had gotten used to it. Most of it was to the park, and most of it was in the rain. The two things just clicked.

When Gracie arrived at the park, it was almost always empty. Occasionally there would be a lone skateboarder, lining up the benches and crashing at the end. But on those days when the park was silent except for the pounding of the rain and the croaking of a lost bullfrog, Gracie took over the playground. It was astonishing the way she moved so well with the rain, silently but firmly. She looked as if a part of it. And the look on her face—so free.

What she is doing requires strength and endurance. But most of all, determination. She steps to the bar and grips it, but do you see that her knuckles are not white? See how relaxed she is as she pulls her body up in the air? Watch her chin pose directly above the fragile bar. Then watch it all tumble down, the bar above her once more.

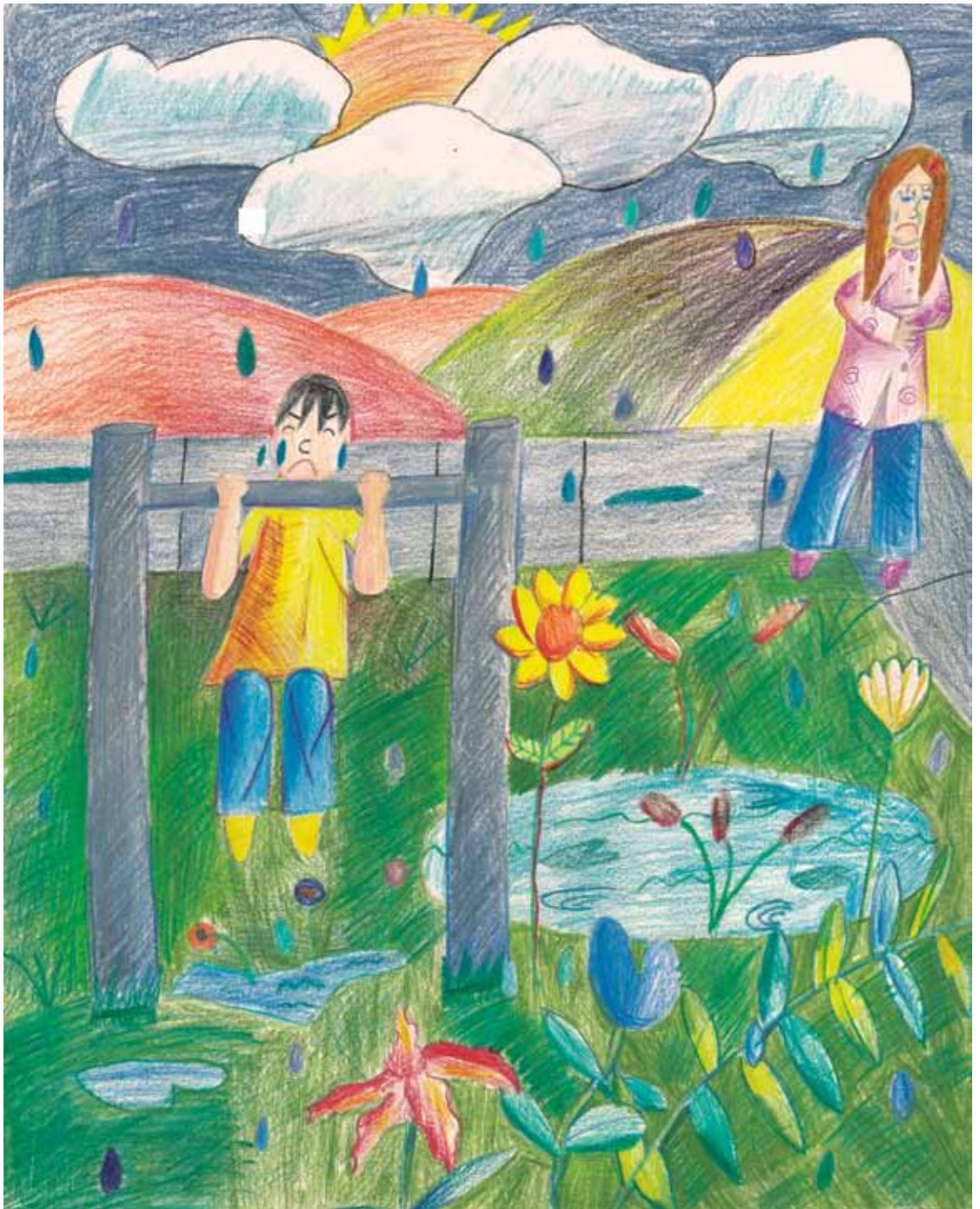
This act of power and grace combined continues twenty-six times. Her goal. She drops down, feet reuniting with the earth. The look on her face is the same as if she is a bird landing softly in the hills of heaven. She is ready. She has practiced for two months, ever since the last fitness testing. Then she had gotten four chin-ups, and with a heavy heart she remembers having to



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He lacks the grace that she has. But the power, the will—it's all there

write that number on her sheet. Now she can write twenty-six and go to the fitness competitions. But there is one face she needs to see before all that is done.

“HEY, LOUIS! How many this time, huh, bud?” Coach Winters slaps him on the back like a long-lost buddy. The dumbest thing is that Louis replies in the same buddy voice.

“Twenty-four,” says Louis, grinning across at his coach’s amazed face, although he’s heard and spoken the number at least a hundred times. They babble about the upcoming fitness stuff like it was the world.

But Coach has another period to attend to, and although he’ll wait until the last minute to talk to Louis, Gracie knows he has to leave. She waits until they say goodbye and Coach walks off, whistling and grinning.

“So... twenty-four, huh?” she asks, trying out the buddy voice. She’s just got to start drawling a little and smiling really hard.

He looks at her like she’s stupid. Why would she be interested in what he was doing? But because he is a show-off and likes to tell people that, he nods.

She leans in close. “Twenty-six,” she says, carefully enunciating each word. She doesn’t leave yet, though. His expression is what she’s looking for.

It’s first confusion, like he has to piece together exactly what she’s saying. Then it’s obvious he’s finding the difference between the numbers. When that’s done,

recognition—pure, surprised recognition—flashes across his face. All in a matter of two seconds.

She doesn’t wait any longer and hurries away, swinging her books so that she looks relaxed, leaving him to contemplate.

GRACIE CAN’T FOCUS. It’s the last period of the day, and all she can look at is Louis. He’s angry, that’s for sure. There’s something else, too. He keeps looking up at her, and seeing that she is still watching him, turning away.

Louis is like a snake—if you challenge and corner him against a wall, he’ll bite. Any little thing will tick him off now. He keeps frowning and glancing around.

He confronts her when the bell rings. She has been expecting it, and has the whole thing planned out.

“I can do it,” he tells her. “Twenty-seven.”

“Prove it,” is all she answers, asking if he knows where her park is. When he nods, she only smiles and pats him on the back. Good sportsmanship. It can go a long way.

IT’S raining, again, when she arrives at the park. To her surprise, he’s already there, huffing and puffing under the bar. It’s not what she expected, but Gracie ignores that and keeps going.

Right when he sees her he flops down, as if he was planning what to do. “I can do it!” he says again, but he doesn’t sound like he’s too sure.

“Lemme see it,” says Gracie, who is

equally nervous. It's the first time she's let someone else be in her park, her *kingdom*.

The first few are easy—he does them good and quick, using energy to impress. He hits ten before he dwindles a little below the bar. His eyes flicker to match hers, and he sees her outstretched fingers—ten of them.

“Ten, keep going!” she calls, swinging her legs. The key, she knows, is to look relaxed and believe in herself. She shouldn't sweat it, but in the back of her mind, she finds the difference between the number he's on and twenty-six. What if she's really *not* ready?

He's got fifteen. Five to twenty. Then another six to twenty-six. Suddenly, to Gracie, the numbers feel small and weak, unable to hold the strength that Louis has. Louis himself, under the bar, feels totally different. They are painful and unwelcoming. He is going into new territory. But he's got the determination that Gracie has. Even if every bone breaks, he'll go on and smile at the end.

Twenty. He recognizes the number portrayed on Gracie's fingers. All of a sudden he's in the tens just like the goal. He hangs under the bar, fists clenched but a determined smile on his face. He won't quit on his dream, that's just not who he is. He passes his old goal and hesitates. He's never done more. But—of course—someone else has. So Louis doesn't stop. He keeps at it. Slowly, painfully, he sucks up a breath and pulls his weight up above the bar. His hands feel weak, but once again, his eyes are lit up with some magic

that brings him ever forward.

Twenty-five. It's more than he's ever done before and he knows it. His arms look like string from the Dollar Store as he plops back under. You can see the white knuckles, the difference between Gracie and him. He lacks the grace that she has. But the power, the will—it's all there. He has strength. Gracie has endurance.

Suddenly he has the power and yanks himself up like a puppet on a string. It breaks Gracie's heart. That was her number, the special one she claimed as her own. He looks at her straight in the eyes. There are water petals clinging to her eyelashes, refusing to let go. She swears it is the rain, silently, to herself.

With the number in his mind, he pulls it up. Gracie's index finger cannot move. Now the race was not only a tie, but had a winner. Once again, Louis's hand would go up in the air, held by a referee's. Once again, Coach would smile at him and pat his back. It was as if nothing had changed. Gracie hadn't beaten the record. She hadn't done a thing. At least, she hadn't done anything he couldn't do.

Letting himself down, Louis stands there, panting. She gazes at him from her spot on the sidewalk curb, hugging her jacket tighter around her as if trying to keep the number close. But she knows as well as he does that it is gone forever.

He finally turns to face her. The sun captures his face in such a way, how the shadow of his nose fades over his cheek. She looks down.

“Nice job, Gracie,” he says, and she

knows he can distinguish the difference between the raindrops on her face and the tears. He's just trying to make her feel better. Gracie feels like she doesn't need his help.

"I can do it!"

He turns. She's standing up, looking at him with the magic. When she sees that he's watching her, she leaps to the bar. Unlike Louis, she takes her time. She wants to get this right.

Nothing's running through her head like usual. The days before, she would wonder how far she'd get in the fitness records. She'd picture Louis's face when she told him. Now, her mind is blank. She's in her own world now, back when the clouds were fluffy and the sunshine really was liquid gold. It was all too easy. There was nothing there. It was her and the bar. In a way, she knew Louis was standing behind her, counting, but he couldn't enter her world, the world where there truly were happily ever afters.

She's gotten to twenty-six with no trou-

ble. It was like meeting the same stranger you met yesterday on the road—like all of a sudden they really were someone to talk to just because they appeared in your life twice. But all of a sudden, the world disappears. She's opened her eyes, and before her is the red setting sun, bold and miserable, taking a worthless journey across the sky.

Gracie watches the bar above her. Why? Why did she have to go *again*? Wasn't this the last one? But Louis has done it. So, ever so slowly, she comes up above the bar.

She hears a gasp. "Twenty-seven?"

She swings down. "You betcha," she tells him. With extraordinary beauty, as if she hadn't done a single thing to exhaust herself, she flies up to rest her chin on the bar.

Her breath gets caught. She's going to start crying—right here on this bar. But this time, of joy. Of pure, real ecstatic joy. Right up here, on top of this bar. Right up here, in the hills of heaven. ❁



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