

dignity:

creative expressions from the
inspiration project



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about:

The Inspiration Project is a volunteer collaboration between the University of Rochester and CP Rochester, a nonprofit organization that supports individuals with physical and developmental disabilities. During the spring of 2015, ten writing students from the University of Rochester met weekly with ten writers from CP Rochester. Through extensive one-on-one conversations, the UR students and CP Rochester adults have produced the creative works assembled here.

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table of contents:

preface	3
Mermaid City – Tori Bement Schramm	4
Opening the Envelope: A Peek into the Life of Tom – Tom Casatta	14
Poems – Charlene Furhy	19
The Human Body and the Bus — Jane Geffel	24
Princess Heather – Heather Gloede	26
A Story About Friendship — Patrick Hurley	30
Murder at Moonstone High: The Rumor Mill Story – Ann Kurz	35
Toni’s Dream — Toni Montgomery	45
Poems — Thaun Nguyen	48
Lightning Horse — The Lovely Latrice Pearson	54
Brielle — Caitlin Weir	58
Poem — Jeff Yarmel	61

preface

One of the things that inspires me about the Inspiration Project is that everyone is very talented and accepting. Some people are willing to learn different things about different people, and learn different ways to work together as a team. I think of this program as a puzzle. Each of us is one piece of a colorful puzzle of poetry, playwriting, and memoirs. The pieces are different, but in the end we all fit together as one big world of storytelling. If we look inside the puzzle, we can see hope for the future. We've been working to put the pieces of this puzzle together for two months. We hope that you enjoy our presentation, and that it helps change your life for the better.

- The Lovely Latrice Pearson



Mermaid City

By Tori Bement
In collaboration with Emily Corpuz

Inspired by Tori's mom, Lynn Bement, and Jenny Jones, a good friend, and their amazing trip to the Jersey Shore.



Once there were three sister mermaids who traveled from beach to beach. The oldest sister was named Aries and she had long, mint green hair and a dark blue tail that shimmers when she swims. The second oldest sister was named Jennifer and she had long, dark brown hair and a royal purple tail that also shimmers when she swims. The youngest sister was named Cotton Candy and she had long, light pink hair and a light blue holographic tail.

Even though they traveled from beach to beach, their favorite beach was Asbury Park along the Jersey Shore. One Thursday, Cotton Candy was collecting

seashells on the seafloor when she looked up and saw an object floating on the surface of the water. It was moving really fast and making ripples. She swam up to the surface to see what was going on. It turned out the object making ripples was a man on a surfboard. When Cotton Candy swam up to the surface to investigate, the man thought he saw a long fish with light pink hair. So, because this distracted him, he lost control of his board, fell into the water, and started to drown. Cotton Candy rushed into action and rescued him, pulling him ashore underneath a boardwalk.

Her sisters followed her underneath the boardwalk. The man was unconscious. Aries said, "How could you save him? How could you save a human?" Just then, the man started to wake up. Aries and Jen leapt back into the water, but Cotton Candy stayed behind. She saw the man was sort of buff and had short, sandy, curly hair.

Because the saltwater burned the man's eyes, he couldn't open them and couldn't see anything. Blinded, he just started asking, "What happened? What's happening?" not knowing if anyone would respond.

Then, he heard a sweet, young voice saying, "I saved you." He turned to where the voice was coming from, but he still couldn't see.

He said, confused, "Thank you." And Cotton Candy already knew she liked him.

Then she asked, "What's your name?"

He said, "Leonardo Green."

Then Cotton Candy kissed him. He slowly opened his eyes, his vision still blurry.

"See you soon, Leo," Cotton Candy said.

Suddenly, she saw a woman running towards them, so Cotton Candy leapt into the water and hid behind a rock. The woman had short brown hair and was wearing a sundress with flowers and a sunhat.

"What happened? Are you okay?" she asked Leonardo.

Leonardo said, "I heard someone talking to me. It was a young girl's voice."

"You are definitely seeing the doctor when we get back," the woman said. "There's no one here!"

Then the two left, Leonardo stumbling because he still couldn't see anything but blurs.

Cotton Candy watched him leave, and wished that she could go with him.

Then, the three sisters swam home, which was just off of Asbury Park, underneath the water. They were all quiet on the swim home. Jen and Aries were a little mad, but Cotton Candy was feeling a little flirty. She realized she had never felt this way before. Even though she was quiet, she was plotting how she could see him again.

Once they reached home, they went to bed. When Jen and Aries fell asleep, Cotton Candy swam back up to shore, knowing her sisters wouldn't approve of her seeing him again.

She poked her head out of the water and looked all around to see if the coast was clear. Then, she army crawled to a beach chair that someone had left on shore, and, with all her might, she climbed up on the chair. During the night, as the water evaporated off her body, her tail transformed into legs.

The next morning, Leonardo went to his work at the beach gift shop. As he came into work, he high-fived his co-workers and said "Hey." Then, he got distracted by a light in the distance. So, he said, "What the heck was that?" He walked towards where the light was coming from, which was a crowd of people along the beach. It turns out the lights came from cameras flashing.

As he pushed through the crowd, he came across a beautiful girl lying in a beach chair. Other people were pointing and laughing at her. His eyes widened in surprise.

Cotton Candy was already awake from other people laughing at her. She was a little disheveled because she didn't know what was going on, which made her afraid, and a little surprised. When she saw Leonardo, she recognized him and reached for him. He ran back to the store and grabbed a towel. He returned to her and

picked her up, then brought her to the shop and laid her on a chair in there.

At this point, Jen and Aries woke up. They realized they couldn't find Cotton Candy. They searched everywhere for her and started panicking. After a while of searching, they thought that maybe Cotton Candy went to the surface to find the man they saw yesterday. So, they swam up to the surface as much as they could so that no one can see their tails. But, they still couldn't find her. After more searching, they decided to stop looking for now. They would pick up again later.

Leonardo and Cotton Candy headed back to the store, but Cotton Candy didn't have the strength to walk in. So, Leonardo quickly went to the restaurant next door and got some breakfast. When he got back, they went inside and he searched for clothes for her. He found a blue tank top with a white mermaid on the back and white shorts. His two female co-workers dressed Cotton Candy. The co-workers were kind of wondering what she was doing there and what was going on, but they were nice and worked around her all day.

When lunchtime came around, Cotton Candy was still too shocked to talk. But she smiled at him. After lunch, Leonardo said, "I have to get back to work now. You get yourself comfortable."

Cotton Candy gazed at him as he worked. Every once in awhile, he noticed this, and smiled at her.

At the end of the day, he decided to take her to his home, knowing that his sister, Alexander, was going to have a fit.

Around dinner time, they drove back to his house in his yellow Jeep. When they pulled up to his house, Cotton Candy had gotten enough strength back to walk. They walked up to his house, Cotton Candy looking at the twinkling stars and the pale moon above them.

Leonardo opened the door and said, "Come on in." It was a little house, but it was cozy.

Leonardo shouted, "I'm home!"

His sister, Alexander, was in the kitchen. She came up and hugged him. Then, seeing Cotton Candy holding on to his arm, she asked, "Who is that?"

He replied, "I know who she is, but I don't know her name."

Cotton Candy was overwhelmed by all of this.

They all ate dinner. During the meal, Alexander was a little hostile towards Cotton Candy, while Cotton Candy remained quiet the entire time. Leonardo did all of the talking.

After dinner, Leonardo made a bed for Cotton Candy out of the pull-out couch. He put bedsheets on the couch, which were white with pale blue shells.

Before he went upstairs, he said, "If you need anything, I'll be right upstairs."

Cotton Candy said, softly, "Goodnight." She was comforted by the sound of the mermaid wind chimes outside the door and the aquarium near her bed as she fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Jen and Aries were down beneath the waves, talking about Cotton Candy, wondering if she was okay or if she was hurt, which made them more frantic.

The next morning was a Saturday. Leonardo came downstairs, happy as a clam. He was wearing a white tank top and tan shorts. He was terrified to see that Cotton Candy was nowhere to be seen. He looked all over the house. Then, he looked out on his balcony to find her standing there, looking at the water, the sunrise coming over the horizon, the wind blowing through her pink hair.

He startled her by saying, "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

She said, surprised, "Fine, thank you."

Cotton Candy, now with enough strength to talk, said, "My name is Cotton Candy."

He nodded a little, acknowledging that he heard, and that he now knew her name.

He asked, "Do you want some breakfast? Alexander has something cooking downstairs."

Hand in hand, they headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Alexander had made eggs, bacon, and toast. She said, "Good morning, Leo." Leo gestured his head towards Cotton Candy, knowing Alexander still wasn't sure about Cotton Candy's being there yet.

Leonardo decided to put his foot down. "She's a guest," he said. "I want her to feel comfortable. So, you should say good morning to her."

Then Alexander said, begrudgingly, "Good morning," to Cotton Candy.

After breakfast, they all three headed to the beach. Leonardo asked Cotton Candy to swim with him, but she freaked out because she doesn't want to go in the water since that would make her tail reappear.

As Alexander sun bathed, Leonardo and Cotton Candy walked along the beach, collecting seashells. They were away from Alexander all day, walking along the boardwalk, talking and laughing. At the end of the day, they had a nice dinner for two at a hot dog stand in the back of the Stone Pony in Asbury Park. Then, they got ice cream at Eddie Confetti's Ice Cream shop. There, one of the kids went crazy over her hair, saying out loud, "She has pink hair! Like cotton candy!" The other customers looked at her, and Cotton Candy's face turned bright red.

Leo put his arm around her and took her outside the shop. He turned to her and said, "I'm sorry about that. They're kids."

They returned to Alexander, who was fast asleep, covered in a zig-zag, multi-colored, towel. They awoke her gently and went home.

When they got home, Alexander headed upstairs. But before she did, she said, sternly, "Don't be too long, Leo."

With Alexander upstairs, Leonardo held Cotton Candy around the waist. He said, "I had a really good time today."

She whispered, "I did, too." She gently rested her head on his chest. He placed his hand underneath her chin, lifting her head up. He gently brushed back her hair. Then, he slowly leaned down and kissed her. After a long moment, he wished her good night. Leonardo went upstairs to his bed, and Cotton Candy went to sleep on the couch, comforted again by the sound of the wind chimes and the aquarium.

During the middle of the night, Cotton Candy woke up. She had had a bad dream. So, she went upstairs to the bathroom. In the bathroom was a big, round tub. She locked the door behind her, and started to run the water in the tub. She found some bath beads, dropped them in the water, and got in the water herself. Her tail flippers came up over the opposite end of the tub. Wanting to get comfortable, she slid down underneath the water.

In the meantime, Leonardo heard something going on in the bathroom next to his room. So, wearing a white tank top and white shorts, he slowly slumped to the bathroom barefoot and knocked on the wood door.

Cotton Candy was startled. She shot up from underneath the water, and answered, "Leo?"

He said, in a groggy voice, "Yeah. What are you doing? It's two o'clock in the morning. Open the door!"

Panicked, she said, "NO!!"

Leonardo heard a big thud. He panicked and said, "Open the door! Cotton Candy! What was that?"

She replied, "Nothing!"

"It didn't sound like nothing,"

Leonardo responded.

The noise Leonardo was hearing was the sound of Cotton Candy furiously drying off so that her tail would go away.

At that moment, Alexander, wearing a light pink satin robe, came to see what was happening. She asked Leo, "What's going on?"

"Cotton Candy has locked herself in the bathroom!" he replied. "And I can't figure out what's wrong."

At that moment, Cotton Candy opened the door and came walking out, wearing a blue tank top and silky bottoms with little mermaids on them, as well as a blue towel wrapped around her head.

Leonardo leaned on the doorframe. He asked Cotton Candy, "What was happening in there? You scared me. What was that sound?"

Cotton Candy responded, "The hair dryer."

Alexander rolled her eyes at this. Then, she went back to bed.

Cotton Candy said, "I'm fine, Leo. Sorry for worrying you." And she kissed him on the cheek. They both softly said goodnight to each other, then returned to their separate beds.

The next morning, Cotton Candy woke up to Leonardo screaming. Cotton Candy ran upstairs to Leonardo's room. He wasn't there. She ran to Alexander's room, and was horrified to see Leonardo holding his sister. No matter how much he shook her, she didn't wake up. She wasn't dead because he could hear her heart beating. Leonardo saw the phone by Alexander's bed and called 911.

An ambulance came and took Alexander away. At the hospital, Leonardo

was fidgety. Cotton Candy tried to calm him down. She was somewhat successful. Finally, the doctor came out and talked to Leonardo privately. When Leonardo came back out, he was quiet. Cotton Candy grabbed his arm and asked, "What happened?"

He sighed and said, "Alexander is in a coma. The doctor says to go home, get something to eat, and rest."

It was raining when they were walking to the car. It was a very quiet breakfast. Cotton Candy tried to brighten the mood. Leo would only nod. When she was done with her plate, she washed her plate, and put it in the cupboard. Then, she washed Leo's plate.

After breakfast, they went to the living room to watch a movie. It was still pouring rain outside. They started watching *Aquamarine*, eating popcorn during the movie. After the movie ended, Cotton Candy leaned over and asked, "Are you feeling better?"

Surprisingly, she got a response. "Not really," Leonardo said, "but I'm with you. That makes me feel better."

They looked into each other's eyes. Leonardo brought his hand to her soft cheek. He leaned in and kissed her. Then, they moved closer to each other and held each other in a loving embrace.

Pillows were strewn on the floor.

Leonardo showered afterwards, and she showered after him. Then, they got dressed and headed to the hospital. They entered Alexander's room and saw that she was awake. Leonardo gave her flowers and a kiss on the forehead, and said, "How are you feeling?"

She said in a soft voice, "I can come home tomorrow."

He said, "Good."

Then, Alexander asked Cotton Candy, "Can you please get me some water?"

Cotton Candy said, "Of course."

They were at the hospital for most of the day. Together in Alexander's room, they watched shows on TV like *The Price is Right* and TLC's *Say Yes to the Dress*. During *Say Yes to the Dress*, Cotton Candy, leaving her seat by the window, went over to the other side of the bed and sat with Leonardo on the mini-couch. She innocently put her hand on his knee and scooted towards him. Alexander looked over at them looking at each other. After a moment, she realized her little brother had grown up.

After several episodes of *Say Yes to the Dress*, Cotton Candy and Leonardo went home. On the way home, they got pizza at the local pizza place. Then, that night, at twilight, Leonardo and Cotton Candy were outside on lawn chairs in the back of the house next to the pool looking at the sunset. They pushed the lawn chairs together. Then, they had a little chat.

Cotton Candy softly said, "Tell me something you've never told anyone."

"That's a hard one," Leonardo said. "Well, I always wanted to own my own store on the boardwalk. How about you?"

She looked at Leo and said in a soft voice, "Promise you won't freak out." She brushed his hair out of his eyes and whispered, "I'm a mermaid."

He softly laughed and said, "Yeah, right."

Cotton Candy told Leonardo to close his eyes for a second. After a few minutes, he heard a splash. She called to him, "Leo! Come in the pool!"

He took off his shirt and dove in. He floated on a pool noodle to the shallower end, so that he was standing up in the pool. She swam over to him, keeping her tail under the water. Because the water was rather dark, he couldn't see anything under the water.

"What's wrong?" Cotton Candy asked. "Why won't you go to the deep end?"

He replied, "I had an accident a couple days ago, and I don't want to go in the deep end."

Cotton Candy said, "I remember."

"What?" Leonardo said.

Cotton Candy said, "Never mind that, just take my hands." Then, she slowly brought him out to the deep end. He started to freak out and held on to her for dear life.

He said, "Wait—why don't I feel your legs on mine?"

Cotton Candy brought him closer to the pool light and said to Leonardo, "Look down."

His eyes get big and his mouth opened. He let go of her. She caught him before his head went under.

"Don't you drown on me!" she said to him.

He stuttered, "You're a mermaid?"

"Yes!" she said, as they waded towards the wall of the pool. "I'm the one who saved you."

He smiled wide and kissed her.

Leonardo and Cotton Candy swam together until bedtime.

After a couple hours, Leonardo got out of the pool and lifted her onto a lawn chair. While he was carrying her to the chair, she whispered, "Boy, you're strong."

When Leonardo set her down on the chair, and helped her towel off, he said, "You have a beautiful tail."

With Alexander out of the house, they slept on the couch together.

Early the next morning, around 10 am, they heard a knock at the door. After a few knocks on the door, Leonardo got up. He found two ladies wearing flip flops and dresses which were bought from a store on the boardwalk. He said, "Hi. Who are you?"

The girl with the mint green hair said, "I'm Aries. This is my sister, Jen."

Just then, Cotton Candy shouted, "Who is it, Leo?"

"Two ladies, hun," he said. "Aries and Jen."

Cotton Candy rushed to the door. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Aries said in a stern voice, "Looking for you!"

Cotton Candy said to Leo, "Could you give us a minute?"

"Sure," he replied.

Cotton Candy walked out of the house to her sisters, and Leo shut the door.

Aries yelled, "What are you doing with him? You know humans are bad! Especially men. And leaving your home! Don't you miss home? What were you thinking of?" She was really acting like a mother.

Jen tried to calm Aries down. "Don't be too hard on her. At least we found her," Jen said.

Cotton Candy said, "Why are you two so against humans?"

"Because," Aries said, "we were in love once. When we revealed our tails, they left us."

Cotton Candy said, "*Please* give him a chance. He's different." Then, Cotton Candy whispered, so the neighbors couldn't hear, "I showed him my tail last night. And he didn't freak out. Please. I love him. Give him a chance."

Then, she asked them, "Are you guys hungry?"

Jen said, "Yeah!"

"Come on in," Cotton Candy said. "Let me get you guys something."

Jen followed Cotton Candy inside, but Aries was stubborn, and she stayed right there.

Jen said, "Are you coming, Aries?"

"I guess," Aries replied.

They had quite an unusual breakfast of fish. Cotton Candy and Leo sat

together. Leo asked, "Who are these two, Cotton Candy?"

"My sisters," she replied.

"You never told me you have sisters," Leo said.

After breakfast, Leo and Cotton Candy got ready to pick up Alexander. The two girls were fixated on the aquarium. Leo said, like a father, "Okay girls, there's a pool in the back. We'll be back in a little while."

When Leo and Cotton Candy walked into Alexander's room in the hospital, she was already in a wheelchair, ready to go. Leonardo said, "Hi, sis. How are you feeling?"

"Great. I never felt better," Alexander replied.

Just then, the doctor came in. He said, "Leonardo, I have to talk to you in private before you leave."

A couple minutes went by, and then Leonardo came back in the room and started pushing his sister out. Cotton Candy asked, "What did the doctor say, Leo?"

Leonardo whispered, "I'll tell you later."

On the way home, Leonardo said to Alexander, "We have a couple of guests from a different place at our home, so you have to be nice to them, even though their habits might be a little weird."

When the three of them got home, Aries and Jen were sitting inside looking at the fish tank. Alexander asked Cotton Candy, "Who are they?"

Cotton Candy said to Alexander, "They're my sisters."

Alexander said to Cotton Candy, "By the look of their hair, I can tell they're related to you."

Leonardo chimed in, "Alexander, that's not nice!"

Leonardo said to Alexander and Cotton Candy's sisters, "We'll let you guys acquainted." Then, he took Cotton Candy into the kitchen.

Leonardo held her close. She asked him, "What's going on with Alexander?"

In a very soft voice, he said, "The doctor gave her six months to live."

Cotton Candy said, "What?"

Leonardo said, "When Alexander and I were teenagers, she went in just for a normal check-up. She came home and told our parents. I can still hear our parents crying." He looked sad. After a minute, Cotton Candy hugged him.

She said, "Well, let's make these last six months the best."

Cotton Candy and Leo went back into the living room to check on the other three. They were talking like BFF high school girls. Leonardo said to his sister, "Time for your meds."

Alexander said, "Actually, I'm pretty tired. I want to go to bed."

Leonardo and Cotton Candy helped her up the stairs. After they put Alexander in bed, Leonardo went back downstairs. Cotton Candy went into Alexander's closet and got a light blue nightgown, and she helped Alexander change into the nightgown. While Alexander was in bed, she talked to Cotton Candy. She suddenly asked, "Cotton Candy, do you love my brother? I saw you looking at him in the hospital."

Cotton Candy blushed. Alexander put her hand on Cotton Candy's hand, and said, "It's okay. Tell me."

Cotton Candy softly said, "Yes." Then she said, "Get some good sleep, Alexander. We'll bring dinner up to you later." And slowly, Cotton Candy shut the door.

She went downstairs and saw Leonardo sitting on the couch between the two girls.

"Alexander is sleeping safe," Cotton Candy said. Her sisters said, "We should be getting back home. You sure you won't come, Cotton Candy?"

"No," Cotton Candy said, "I'm happy here."

Leonardo and Cotton Candy said goodbye to them. As they were leaving out the front door, Cotton Candy shouted, "Make sure no one's on the beach!" Aries and Jen both turned around and waved. Leonardo shut the door.

Leonardo said to Cotton Candy, "Well, she's sleeping, huh?" Then, they both sat on the couch.

"Yes, she's very happy to be home," Cotton Candy said. Then, they kissed for a long moment.

True to Cotton Candy's words, they did make it the best six months of Alexander's life. One morning when Cotton Candy and Leonardo were in Alexander's room talking to her, Alexander looked at Leonardo, who was sitting to her right, and she grabbed his hand, and looked to the left, and grabbed Cotton Candy's hand. Then, she brought their hands together and placed Leo's on top of Cotton Candy's, and rested them on top of her stomach. Alexander looked at Leo, and said, "Do it."

Leonardo said, "What?"

Alexander softly said, "Get up and do it."

Leonardo, obeying his older sister, got up and walked to the foot of the bed. He began, "Cotton Candy —"

Alexander interrupted, "No, you have to kneel down on the floor!"

He argued, "It's a wood floor!"

Alexander said, "You big baby. It's just a minute!"

He laughed, and then he got down on one knee, took Cotton Candy's hand, and said, "Cotton Candy, will you marry me?"

With no hesitation, Cotton Candy said, "Yes!"

Alexander tried to clap, and said, "Good job!"

Then Leonardo got up kissed Cotton Candy.

That night, she went to bed for the last time, happy for the life ahead for her brother and Cotton Candy.

On the eve before the wedding, it was raining outside, and Cotton Candy and Leonardo were talking in bed. They were discussing honeymoon places. Leonardo asked, "Where do you wanna go, honey?"

She replied softly, "Nowhere. I'd rather use the money to get your store."

He smiled and brushed her light pink hair out of her face, and said, "You're sweet." Then he kissed her.

The next morning, Cotton Candy made Leo's favorite breakfast: waffles and a strawberry smoothie. After breakfast, they were rushing around the house getting ready. Then, they got in the car and drove. They got changed in the changing rooms on the beach. Cotton Candy's long, billowy white dress had a wide see-through collar with lace at the neck and the top of the dress. It fell to her calves. There was a large bow at the small of her back. She was wearing a really pretty sun hat decorated with white flowers, attached to which was her veil. She was also barefoot since they were on the beach.

When they approached the shore, where the ceremony was taking place, they walked up to a rug that was blue like the ocean. All their friends and family were there. Cotton Candy's sisters were sitting on rocks where no one could see them. Leonardo looked handsome in his tux. It was a beautiful ceremony.

After the reception, Cotton Candy took Leonardo to the water under the boardwalk where they first met. She called her sisters over. After a few minutes, they popped out of the water and congratulated them both.

Aries said, "We have something for you, Leo. Come in the water. Close your eyes."

After he closed his eyes, Aries took him by the hand and led him further into the water. Remembering the accident, Leonardo started to struggle, but Cotton Candy said, "It's okay," and went deeper into the water with him.

A bright light shined in the water where Leonardo was. Aries touched his shoulder and said softly, "Open your eyes."

He looked around and saw all these tails. Aries asked, "How many tails do you see?"

He started counting. "There's four tails," he said. Then, he did a double take, and suddenly, it connected for him. He said, excitedly, "There's four tails!"

He swam around energetically and said, "Thank you, Jen and Aries!" His tail was a royal dark blue. He swam back to the group and said to Cotton Candy, "Now I can see where you lived under the sea."

They all dove under the water, Cotton Candy and Leonardo holding hands. About halfway to her home, he said, "I'm tired." Cotton Candy said, "You're just not used to it yet. We're almost there." They came upon a castle, and they spent the night there. They slept in big clamshell beds.

The next morning, Leonardo and Cotton Candy said goodbye to her sisters, and Leonardo thanked them again. Aries said, "Oh, before you leave, we want to give you something else."

She gave him a big conch shell and said, "Call us anytime."

He said, confused, "Okay."

Cotton Candy and Leonardo swam back up to the beach. At this point, the beach wasn't open yet, so they dried off until their tails turned back into legs. They went back to the house.

While they were driving home, Leonardo turned to Cotton Candy and said, "I love you. And I love the present your sisters gave me. Did you know about this?"

“No,” she said. “I had no clue they were doing that for you!”

They got home and hung out the rest of the day, watching movies. They had spaghetti for dinner. Leonardo said, “After supper, we should call your sisters on the shell-phone. But now, we should focus on us. It’s so quiet without her here.”

Cotton Candy placed her finger underneath his chin and tilted his head up. She said, softly, “She’s always here.” Then she kissed him.

After they were done eating, they called Aries and Jen. The phone rang for two rings before Jen answered. The sound sounded like water. Jen called for Aries, and they asked how Cotton Candy and Leonardo’s day went. Leonardo said, “Great! How was yours?”

“We can’t complain,” they responded. Cotton Candy then asked Leo to step out, and Leo did. She said to her sisters, “I’m getting Leo his own store. How would you guys like to find stuff under the sea to sell?”

They said, “Sure! We would love to!”

Cotton Candy said, “Great! Well, it’s pretty late. We should all think about going to bed.”

“Okay!” Jen and Aries said.

“Have a good night!” Cotton Candy said to her sisters, and hung up.

Cotton Candy walked into the living room. Leonardo playfully grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap and asked, “What were you talking about?”

“It’s a surprise!” Cotton Candy said.

A couple months later, Cotton Candy came drudging into the house to find Leo sitting on the couch, eyes closed. She happily screamed, “Leo! Come with me!”

They walked across the road to the beach. Cotton Candy covered his eyes and walked him down the boardwalk a little ways. He heard a lot of kids and a lot of

people. Cotton Candy suddenly stopped and took her hand off his eyes. Then, she said, “Okay. Look.”

He was amazed by what he saw: a store that said “Leo’s” on it! It was small, but it had a lot of stuff in it. He said, “Thank you, honey!” Then they kissed.

Cotton Candy said, “Jen and Aries got some stuff from the bottom of the ocean, like these seashells. And they agreed to work with us, too!”

He spun her around happily. She laughed, and they kissed again. They didn’t realize a crowd was watching them, and the crowd started clapping. Suddenly, in the crowd, Jen and Aries appeared. He rushed up to them and hugged them. He said to them, “Thank you. The only problem is the name of the store.”

Cotton Candy said, “What’s wrong with the name?”

He said, “I think it should be called Mermaid City. No one will know there are real mermaids working here, but I will.”

They sold mermaid umbrellas with mermaids on them, dresses that resembled mermaid tails, mermaid pins, mermaid plaques, and everything mermaid. And Leonardo and Cotton Candy visited Aries and Jen some weekends, and they lived happily in both worlds.



Opening the Envelope: A Peek into the Life of Tom

By Tom Casatta
In collaboration with Jess Alexander



The Handmade Cards

At a handmade desk in his bedroom of his house on King's Highway, you can often find Tom hard at work. What is his work, you may ask? He'll reply: making people happy. Tom's favorite thing in the world is to make people happy, and he knows many ways to do that.

Tom loves to send happiness in the mail to people all around--through the hundreds of birthday cards he sends each

year. Ever since he was inspired at the age of 21, Tom has loved to send cards to everyone he knows, to help them in celebrating birthdays, congratulatory events, anniversaries, holidays, and more! He stamps and decorates every card with love, and sends them out. He is happiest when he receives thank you notes in return, and sometimes even receives stamps, stickers, and card materials from people as well.

Tom has touched many hearts through his cards. Besides his family and friends, he sends cards to relatives as far as Wisconsin, staff at CP Rochester, staff who previously worked there, doctors and nurses, teachers and retired teachers, his physical therapist, priest Father Paul English, New York Senator Joseph Robach, friends at Saint Bernard's apartments, and realtors at Remax Realty, Realty Group, Remax Plus, Hunt's Realty, John Geisler Realty, and Nothnagle Realtors. Everytime he meets someone new, he asks for their address and birthday! Tom's card-sending is so large that he has to have five calendars to keep track of all the dates, and he was even interviewed by Don Alhart from Channel 13 for his kindness. Tom was more than overjoyed to be interviewed, and to see himself featured in the Bright Spot! To Tom, the work of sending the cards is nothing compared to the joys and thank you's he receives. He loves the feelings of happiness that writing and sending the cards gives him, and also says that the cards "keep him out of trouble."



Making a Difference for People

Besides writing cards that make people smile, Tom loves making a difference in other ways. By mailing out letters to realtors asking for donations for

the Al Sigl Center Walk About, Tom was one of the most successful fundraisers of the event. The Walk About was an important event for CP Rochester, and funded a lot of physical therapies at the CP Clinic. The Walk About is such a huge event that it's held at Eastview Mall each year, and Tom has been able to wheel around the mall in the event, having fun the entire time. Tom raised so much money for the Clinic in the event, they threw a pizza party in his honor!

At the Clinic, a physical therapy center at CP Rochester, Tom does many things to help out, including delivering mail for Clinic (as well as for in-home, service coordination, dental, and speech). In Basic Education, also at CP Rochester, Tom sharpens pencils every week for classes, makes copies, collects folders to clean up after classes, does recycling, sends emails, and more! Tom's favorite place to volunteer in CP, however, is in the CP Wrap Around Program! In this program, Tom makes copies for an art class and helps out in the class, serves drinks at events, makes crafts and decorations for Valentine's Day and other holidays, and has helped to get kids off buses and lead them into CP. For all of his efforts at CP Rochester, Tom was given a "World's Most Magnificent Volunteer Award"!

Tom has liked to help people throughout his life, and has done many other things as well. He was a boy scout when he was young, and enjoyed volunteering even as a kid! He also went to Cerebral Palsy on East Ave, where he was still too young to help out, but he liked being there anyway. He loved to learn even then, and accomplished many things during his child and teenage years, leading up to getting his GRE from Jefferson High School. Tom went on to work at Bugaboo Creek, IBM, and MicroPro, doing all sorts of different things and working hard the entire time.

The Realtor who Raised Him

Tom's many family members have supported him and his kind efforts from the beginning. Tom's father, Gene Cassata, is a real estate salesman who is still working at age 89. He currently works under Nothnagle Realty (since 1991), but he had his own business for 23 years! He also used to be on the board of directors of the Greater Rochester Association of Realtors, and was also elected as Director, Vice-President, and Treasurer of the Real Estate Board in different years. In addition, Gene served on the Rochester Preservation Board and was a member of the Genesee Corridor Task Force. He has won many awards, including "1968 Realtor of the Year" and "Realtor Emeritus"! He originally went to Syracuse University to become a Mechanical Engineer, but got his real estate license in the middle of his college career, did not return to school, and instead worked under mentor Fred Kravitz for 15 years, going on to be extremely successful in real estate. Through real estate, he met his wife, made many friends, and stayed young and sharp. Tom often recommends his father to people looking for a realtor, advertising for his dad whenever he can.

Tom and his dad have always been very close, as Tom helped him during many real estate conventions and more! Tom liked meeting the presidents of the realty associations and realtors from all over New York State, and enjoyed the traveling as well. He even got an award for "Honorary Member of the State Association of Realtors" at a convention at the Concord Hotel in Lake Placid! Tom and his father also bond outside of realty events. They often go to lunch and church, as well as shopping at Wal-Mart, Party City, and Walgreens. They meet up with the family for dinners at Tom's sister's house. Tom's dad loves to go to the Genesee Valley

Antique Car shows, and Tom likes to go with him and have ice cream. Tom was even given a special badge so he could go to all the car shows.

Tom's dad, much like Tom, also believes in giving back to the community, and spreading kindness. He was a charter member, volunteer, and 17-year board member for Continuing Developmental Services, a home and service program for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. He was also on the board for Cerebral Palsy and the Al Sigl Center in Rochester at one time as well.

A Wonderful Mother

Tom's mother was a kind person and a supporter of Tom's humanitarian activities until she passed away. She was an elementary school teacher as well as a teacher at SUNY Brockport. She started to write a book, but never finished. The fact that his mother never finished her book helped to inspire Tom to want to write one. She also encouraged and inspired Tom to start writing his birthday cards, and later said that he "put his sister to shame" in the amount of cards he wrote and sent. Tom's mother also gave back to the community herself, completing volunteer work to help those with cerebral palsy through the program Chapter 3.

Family Matters

Tom is also very close to his sister Maria, who graduated from the U of R, Saint John Fisher College, and Nazareth College, and studied nursing at all 3. She was a nurse for 34 years, and used to work at Elder One, where she would go to people's homes and

watch nursing aides take care of people. She also has worked at Strong Memorial Hospital and Rochester Regional Health. Like Tom and his parents, Maria loves to help to help other people and make a difference. Now, Maria takes care of her husband's aunt Nancy, who is currently 99 and likes to speak her mind. Tom likes to go visit his sister for family dinners, to watch football and baseball, and to see his sister's cats, Buddy, Sarah, and Lucky. Tom wrote an article about Lucky in ABE, and had a great time telling the story of the little cat. Tom's sister feels "blessed" to have such a special, caring brother like Tom. She looks forward to getting cards and coupons sent to her in beautiful envelopes, and loves talking to Tom every day. Tom admires his sister's enthusiasm and sweetness, and loves spending time with her and brightening her day.

Tom's brother-in-law, Sam, works at a computer lab in downtown Rochester. In the past, he was a transporter at the hospital, and went to Saint John Fisher College for his undergraduate and master's studying journalism, communications, and education. Sam loves listening to music, biking, swimming, poker, and spending time with family including Tom and his dad. Tom likes to attend sports events with Sam, and has recently watched the Amerks hockey game and Redwings baseball game with him. Tom likes Sam's Camaro, his love for sports, his cooking (especially his homemade spaghetti sauce), and his sense of humor. Tom says Sam is "fun to be around", a good person, and is working in an exciting and interesting career. Through his job, Sam is also able to help many people. He works at the Rochester Educational Opportunity Center--part of the SUNY system--training at-risk individuals to give them computer skills. Sam will even go in on days off to keepworking and helping people!

Maria and Sam have 4 sons, Robert, Steven, Paul, and Jason. Jason studies business at SUNY Brockport, and Paul studies Business and Accounting at SUNY Albany. Paul also plays Tom's favorite sport, football, and is the Long Snapper for the Division I Albany Football team. Tom likes it when Paul comes to visit, and enjoys having sports-talk with him. Robert and Steven are both graduated and working, and Tom gets to see them both occasionally. Tom keeps in touch with all of his nephews, sending letters and cards a lot.

A Love for Friends

Tom also spends time with and sends cards to many friends. John Geisler, a realtor with a company in his own name and a past president of the real estate board, receives many cards from Tom and is a friend to Tom and his family. Tom has known John as long as he can remember, and has gone to several conventions with him. John plays poker often with Tom's dad and brother-in-law, and also enjoys going to casinos. He comes to Tom's birthday dinners, and sends Tom many cards. John, like many, loves Tom's kindness and his cards. Tom's close friend Chris Cardon, is a basketball coach at West Irondequoit. Tom and Chris go to church together occasionally, and also go out to lunch. Tom enjoys sending birthday and anniversary cards to both Chris and his wife Roxanne, and is overjoyed to send them bits of happiness. Another friend of Tom's, George Haines, volunteers at the hospital and is involved in the Honor flight for Veterans. George occasionally goes out to eat with Tom and his dad, and often gets different cards from Tom.

Everyday Actions

Now, with the support of his family and friends, Tom likes to do things everyday to help other people and make others happy. Helping makes Tom--and many of his family and friends--feel terrific. Making a difference, according to Tom, is a unique, wonderful feeling that everyone should experience. He keeps his birthday cards and his desire to help in mind everyday, and he hopes to inspire others to help in the future.

Overall, Tom keeps his focus on learning all he can, helping others, making people smile, and sending bits and pieces of happiness to friends all over! So come say hello, and expect a piece of happiness in your mailbox soon!



Poems

By Charlene Furhy
In collaboration with Ragyie Rawal



Spring

The birds return from the South,
robins and blue jays and crows.
It's too hot down there.

They come up to the North,
only to go back next winter.

The flowers will come out.
Leaves and trees, too. Little tiny buds.
Roses and daffodils and the easter lily.
Lilacs, too. Dark purple,
light purple, white even.
People plant seeds in the ground;

there are new things growing.

It's spring. We don't need to wear coats;
the warm weather is coming.

Flowers are coming out.
They need water so they can grow.
They'll get thirsty.
When the hot weather comes,
use the rain to cool down.

Getting warmed up,
we wear spring clothes,
spring dresses, lighter fabric.
Maybe shorts, but only cotton.
Sandals too - there should be no sneakers.

It's getting lighter,
there's more daylight!
The days are longer.
The sun is out.
It's not so hard to get up
in the mornings.

When the sun comes out in the spring,
who wants to sleep?

Doing Things Together

I live in a square building,
surrounded by eight other residents.
It's a group home.
There are plants outside, living rooms inside.

I get to do these fun activities:
watch television, do my puzzles, color adult books.
But it's not all indoors.
We go out on field trips and
eat at Olive Garden.
I always say hello when I come back.

I've made different types of friends.
Some loud with energy,
some quiet who hold my hand.

One girl listens to Spanish music.
My roommate watches movies up front,
always cartoons or Walt Disney.
I'm mostly in the quiet back room,
talking to people about ideas.
I try to do different things.

I help out by
guiding people in writing.
I read for them and answer questions.
I go to art classes to make samples.
They said I'll do more later.

I learn, too.
Math and reading and more.
I read A Little House on the Prairie,
but I watched it on TV before.
We get papers about oceans and animals.
Keeping my mind busy...
don't wanna lose it!

They help me get better,
stronger and more independent.
I miss my family,
but I see them on weekends.

I might go back for good someday,
but this is my home for now.

Summer

The kids play in parks
with the dogs, fetch!
They're throwing frisbees around.
The little ones like to play in the sand,
or the swing set. Mother pushes them.

The hot weather comes...
We don't want to sweat in the
summer.
Don't want to bundle up in
heavy winter clothes.
Keep cool.

There's picnics, too --

hot dogs, potato salad, mixed vegetables.
Put it in the cooler,
maybe with something to drink.
Cook on the grill, flop it with tools.
It's a joy for everybody who comes.
We don't want any rain.

You can get sunburned at the beach,
get blisters on your skin.
People lie down on their towels.
They wear sunglasses and bathing suits.
They listen to music on the radio.
Get changed for the summer.

I've been going to Virginia.
We went to Busch Gardens for the shows.
Acting, dancing, different costumes.

I went to Texas to see my nephew Nick.
He got married way back. I remember the tuxedo.

Go out and get some fresh air.
I'm on the porch with the staff.
I've been doing walking with my walker.

I'll be glad when it gets nice.
The days get longer and I feel joy.

My Walker

I hold it in my hands
and slide with the two wheels.
It's gray with a little red knob.
You can fold it and park it.
It makes me more independent.

I stand up more with it,
and go on walks twice a week.
It gets me moving again.

We walk together,
my therapist and I.
Around the physical therapy
room and the hallways.
Looking at the pictures hung up

or catching up with the others.

Sometimes I ride a special bike,
my feet are on the pedals and
my knees bend back and forth.
The handlebars help.

I'm happy I can move around
and keep going.
Don't wanna sit all the time,
or lose my legs.

Don't wanna fall or lose my balance.

I have to learn to pick my feet up
because it's rough on the sidewalk.



The Human Body and the Bus

By Jane Geffel

In collaboration with Ellen Grinnell



This story is about health. This is an important part of life. Everyone has to think about health. You only have one body so you better take care of it if you want to feel good in life.

When humans have a fever, we feel really sick. We drink water, take medicine, and take our temperature with a thermometer. When a bus is sick, it feels like it's burning. You turn it off and you open the hood to see what's wrong. What is going on? You can use a dipstick to diagnose if the engine needs water and oil. When we go to the doctor, he or she uses a stethoscope to hear the heart and lungs. Humans have brains to think and walk, talk, and feel, just like the bus has a computer

that makes it run. The bus has a motor and transmission so it can drive, whereas humans have hearts and blood so we can live. Now, a bus has no emotions; that's the only thing that's different from humans.

I'm going to give the bus a name - Bud the bus, the bus of health. One time I was in the doctor's office - I was on the Bus of Health. The Bus had many new ways of seeing into the body. Now I am giving the human a name - Micah. Unlike Bud, Micah has emotions that he has to deal with.

Now Micah, his health is going downhill. But Micah doesn't know what to do about his health. Micah is about fifty-seven. He is overweight and he doesn't exercise. He is a smoker who smokes a lot -

he smokes two packs a day. Over time he has stopped eating as much and started losing weight.

Now I will tell you more about Micah and Bud. Let us get on the Bud Bus. Most people can choose if they get on the Bud Bus, because they have a free will. So in many ways Micah has many choices about his health. But believe it or not, he is more at risk when he decides not to go to the doctor because anything could go wrong at any time. So Micah needs to get on the Bud Bus. It is very important to get on the Bud Bus if you want good health. But when Micah is on his own he doesn't have anyone to watch over him but himself. If you don't take care of yourself on your own no one else will do it. When you get really sick, you don't always know what is wrong and if you don't go to the doctor it may be too late. When you live on your own you can decide everything that you want in life, whether it's good or bad.

But when you live in a group home, you can't decide everything in life and you have to go to the doctor. There's no choice not to go to the doctor. When you live in a group home, you are forced to work on stuff that Micah isn't forced to work on. But living in a group home in a way is a good thing because we are on top of our health. In a group home, we have people who watch over our health. So living in a group home has its good points health wise.

Now I'm going to give another human a name -- Jean. Jean is forty-nine years old. She lives in a group home with nine other men and women. Her health is pretty good. Let's say that Jean puts up a fuss about going to the doctor every time just like the way Micah does. But Jean needs to go because in the group home life is different.

Now Micah, he has a wife. Her name is Min and she is a nurse. She tried to help Micah, but like a lot of men, he didn't listen to his wife. Before, she did not make Micah

go on the Bus of Health, and that's not a good thing. Micah needs a lot of help like Jean, so his wife is having him go to the doctor now. He better take heed or else he won't make it.

If a bus's tire is running out of air, you need to get it checked before it goes flat. If Micah doesn't go to the doctor in time, he will run out of air like the tire. It will be easy to put air back in the tire, but you can't put more air in Micah.

Now Jean, she is becoming more independent, but she still doesn't like to go to her appointments. Jean's nurse is named Yule. Jean is giving Yule a hard time about her health. Yule is really patient with her but Yule is wearing down and the doctor doesn't know how to get Jean to go her appointments. Now the other staff - Jean's staff - are on her back. But Jean hides and goes for walks even though she has to be in field of vision. She sneaks out.

Jean must sneak back on the Bud Bus through the back door, because she doesn't want to be found. She is embarrassed because she doesn't like to give up her free will, but she wants to get the staff off of her back. Jean's got a hold of the steering wheel, and she's riding the Bud Bus on her way to get a tune-up. She's on top of her health now. She can't go backwards.

But now when Bud the Bus has a breakdown, Micah and Jean won't get help because the insurance won't pay. So keep your eyes and ears open, because times are changing under the Trump way. Before it's too late, you must appreciate the opportunity to get on the Bus of Health. Take advantage of the health care now!!!

Listen to the Bud Bus if you need help. Get on the Bud Bus and ride. Don't ever get off it.

TAKE HEED.

Princess Heather

By Heather Gloede

In collaboration with Magggie Curtis



Once upon a time, there was a beautiful castle that stood tall on a hill in Never Never Land. It was surrounded by a purple sparkly gate guarded by Peter Pan. Inside, there lived a wonderful family, whose daughter, Princess Heather, was an amazing cake decorator. Princess Heather's family was very big and she lived with all of them. Her mother, the Queen Jenell of Never Never Land, loved to eat the food and cakes her daughters made, and so did her husband, King Brady. The Queen also had a younger brother named Ken; he especially liked Princess Heather's cakes. Princess Heather also lived in the castle with her twin sister, Princess Holly, her older sister, Princess Joeline, and Joeline's children: Leah and Steven. Usually, when the family was done with dinner and dessert, her Grandma Rose would do all of the dishes. Everyone did their part.

That day, Princess Heather was making a gigantic cake for the Royal Wedding and she couldn't find her one cup. The Royal Wedding was for the future Queen and King of Never Never Land, the island nearby. The bride and groom were very excited for their cake, but they didn't know what it was going to look like. It was a surprise! Princess Heather looked high and low for her missing one cup. Until a drawer opened and it appeared, and she said, "Thank you, Grandpa Joe."

Grandpa Joe's spirit was always helping her around the kitchen. He was her biggest supporter. The kitchen she had was designed by her grandpa and his spirit still lingered. Princess Heather was making a tie-dye zebra cake, and she needed to measure powdered sugar for the icing. The wedding cake was going to be six feet tall!

"Fiona, can you please get me some flavored fairy dust from the butterfly garden?" Princess Heather asked Fiona. Fiona was Princess Heather's baking assistant. "Of course, Princess Heather!" she said, and she went out to the butterfly garden to collect the fairy dust. The flavored fairy dust was what made Princess Heather's cakes so good. Suddenly, she remembered that she didn't tell Fiona what flavor to pick. She ran to catch up with her and saw Fiona in the hallway.

"I forgot to tell you what flavor to get! We need blue punch and radical raspberry flavor for the Royal Wedding cake."

Fiona smiled. "Sounds great!" Then they heard a crashing sound from the kitchen and looked at each other, surprised. They rushed back to the kitchen and there was something missing: the cake! Then Fiona looked out of the window and saw four of the Pterodactyl Dragons flying away with the cake in their claws. The Pterodactyl Dragons were born in the kingdom and Princess Heather had known them since they were babies. She couldn't believe the dragons stole her cake!

Princess Heather was very upset; she had worked so hard on that cake. A little while later, they heard a familiar sound. The dragons had come back for more! This time, they looked very different, they were tie-dye zebra-colored. Thankfully, Peter Pan was able to stop them at the gate, so they couldn't steal any more of Princess Heather's cakes.

Princess Heather went outside to speak to them. "Why did you take the cake I spent so long making?"

"It looked so good, we wanted to eat it," they replied. "But now we look pretty!"

"I know, you look like my cake!"

The dragons looked down guiltily, "We're sorry we ate your cake, but it was really good."

"What am I supposed to do now? The wedding is tomorrow!"

The dragons replied, "We can help you make a new one!"

The wedding was tomorrow, so the dragons helped Princess Heather make a new cake. They stayed up all night to make sure that the cake was done for the Royal Wedding. Her twin sister Princess Holly came in and said, "Heather, what are you doing?"

Princess Heather replied, "I'm making the wedding cake all over again! Because the dragons ate the first one!" Princess Holly noticed how dark it had gotten outside. "It's three o'clock in the morning, you need to go to bed."

But Princess Heather replied, "No, I have to get this done in time for the wedding."

The dragons continued measuring out the ingredients and stirring them together. After they finished mixing everything together, they poured the mix into the cake pans. Fiona helped the dragons put them into the oven to bake.

After the cakes cooled, Heather put them together and started decorating them. She made the zebra stripes out of crazy-colored fondant.

After she decorated the cake with the tie-dye zebra fondant, the Royal Wedding went on the way it should have before. The recent King and Queen of Never Never Land called Princess Heather up after the wedding, and told her that the cake was delicious.

Princess Heather's sister Joeline was still training the dragons, who agreed to deliver cakes for Princess Heather's customers. If the dragons did a good job in training, they got cakes that didn't have the flavored fairy dust, so it didn't change the way they looked.

While Princess Joeline was training the dragons, Princess Heather was baking a cake

for Princess Joeline's birthday. The cake was going to have blue flowers with red thorns on it, since blue was Princess Joeline's favorite color. Princess Heather looked everywhere for her one cup, but she couldn't find it! This was the second time she couldn't find her one cup, which was strange. Eventually it appeared on the counter and she thanked her grandpa again. Grandpa Joe was the reason that Princess Heather loved baking so much. Grandpa Joe used to cook with Princess Heather and taught her how to measure things. Princess Holly also liked to work in the kitchen, except she preferred cooking. Usually when the family had meals together, Princess Holly would cook and Princess Heather would bake.

The cake was just about done in the oven, and Princess Heather needed to make the Blue RazzleDazzle filling. She needed her one cup again, and again, couldn't find it! This time she had to look everywhere for it, she was so worried she wouldn't find it. Princess Heather gave up and went outside to get the blue rose with red thorns for Joeline's birthday cake. Then she found the one cup next to the blue rose with red thorns.

Princess Heather was confused. "Grandpa Joe, why did you move the one cup to the garden near the blue rose with red thorns? Are you trying to show me something?" Princess Heather stood for awhile, watching the unicorns run around in their pen. When she couldn't think of a reason why the measuring cup was in the garden, she went back inside. She saw something shiny on the ground when she walked into the kitchen and she picked it up. It was a gold doubloon. "Where did this come from?"

Gimpy Gingy limped into the kitchen. Gimpy Gingy was the gingerbread man who had no leg. Gimpy Gingy was always around to help and make everyone happy.

"That came from the pirates, they were in here looking for something."

Princess Heather realized why Grandpa Joe hid her one cup. "They were looking for my one cup," she replied.

Princess Heather and her family went to talk to the pirates. Maybe they had a good reason for trying to steal her one cup. "Why have you been in my kitchen?" Princess Heather asked calmly.

Captain Hook was surprised. "We haven't been in your kitchen!"

Princess Heather replied, "Someone has." And she held up the gold doubloon.

Hook turned and looked at a man with a striped shirt and red hat. "Smee, what do you think you're doing?"

Mr. Smee looked down in shame. "I just wanted someone to pay attention to me. I have been feeling blue lately and I just wanted attention from somebody."

Hook said, "Stealing is not a good way to get attention. Why didn't you just tell us you felt bad?"

Mr. Smee shrugged. "I don't know."

Hook turned back to Princess Heather and her family and apologized for Mr. Smee stealing. Captain Hook said that to make up for it the pirates could help with delivering cakes.

Princess Heather had an idea. "Why don't you go to Joeline's dragon school? The dragons are helping us to deliver cakes too! They have GPS so you can find your way to customers, and we can make saddles too." Captain Hook and his men nodded in agreement at the idea. "That sounds great, Princess Heather! You're so smart, we'd be happy to help."

With that settled, Princess Heather and her family headed back to the castle to finally finish Joeline's blue rose with red thorns birthday cake. While Princess Heather worked on the cake, Joeline was deep in the woods training the dragons and getting the pirates ready to make deliveries.

The training was going well and everyone was having a ball. Tomorrow was Joeline's birthday, so she only had so much time to train the pirates and the dragons. Thankfully, Princess Heather didn't have any deliveries for that week.

The next day, Princess Heather's family had big plans for Joeline's surprise party. First, Princess Holly had to make Joeline's special dinner, but when she was up in the kitchen, she couldn't figure out what she wanted to make. Suddenly, the smell of Grandpa Joe's beef stew filled the air. He never gave away his recipe before he passed away, so Princess Holly didn't know what to do. Then, a voice whispered into her ear: "two pounds of beef stew meat..." Once Princess Holly had everything ready, she headed upstairs to get Joeline. They were going to spend the whole day at the spa inside the castle. Princess Heather was in her purple sparkly footy pajamas, and Holly was wearing pink sparkly footy pajamas. They woke Joeline up and suggested that she put her blue sparkly pajamas on. Now they were all ready: the princesses, Joeline, the Queen and the King, Uncle Ken, Grandma Rose and, of course, Joeline's children: Stephen and Leah.

They headed down to the spa, excited to be pampered. They spent the whole day relaxing and enjoying getting manicures, pedicures, and massages. The

family talked about all of the crazy stuff that had happened in the past week; they were happy that everything worked out. "I think you're going to have a great time tonight," Queen Jenelle said. Joeline smiled from ear to ear, and was happy to hear that she would be having a great birthday.

Later on, they headed upstairs for the party. Everyone was there! Peter Pan, Fiona, Princess Heather's assistant, Shrek, the janitor, Donkey, his girlfriend Ellie, and the unicorn from the butterfly garden. All of the dragons were there outside in the courtyard, and all of the pirates made it there too! It was time for dinner, and Princess Holly brought out Grandpa Joe's famous beef stew, enough for everyone. Joeline was so surprised and so happy that she could have her favorite meal on her special day.

When they were finished eating and chatting, they went outside to enjoy some cake. The dragons were very excited to have some more cake, and Princess Heather made sure that she didn't put flavored fairy dust in their pieces so they wouldn't change color again.

Everyone had a blast, laughter filled the air, and they celebrated the night with full bellies. Shrek's pants burst he was so full, and the dragons giggled with glee. Princess Heather bursted out with laughter, looking around at all of her friends and family, and they all lived happily ever after.



A Story About Friendship

By Patrick Hurley

In collaboration with Julianne McAdams



My Mom is different now. There has been some change. My brother John and my sister Julie don't let my Mom drive, but she was driving a long time ago. Her name is Betty. I agree that she can't drive anymore. In the winter, when the weather gets bad out, she wouldn't be able to drive because of the snow and the ice and the wind. She stopped driving this year. She drove a white Chevy, and she used to pick me up from the Group Home every Saturday.

Every month, our family gets together and has meetings, and we had been talking about it last year. About my Mom's driving. We met at my brother's house out in Victor. We all sat outside. A lot of us came. One brother came down from New York, and my other brother came from

Canada. During the meeting, we sat on benches, and it was sunny. Whenever we meet, there is a lot of laughing. We didn't tell my Mom about our idea. Actually, she found out about it before we planned to tell her. Some people in my family told her about it.

I go see her every Saturday and spend the night. Then I go back to the Group Home on Sunday afternoons. But a long time ago, I was going back on Mondays. I was staying Saturday and Sunday night, but now I don't. I only stay on Saturday night, and one of my sisters comes and gets me on Sundays to take me back to the Group Home.

The Group Home is on Elmwood Avenue in Rochester. I like going back on

Sundays. On Mondays I go to programs, like CP Rochester. Another thing that's changed is I didn't used to go to programs on Mondays, but now I do.

We do a lot of activities at CP. On Tuesdays and Thursdays we go to Adult Education Based class, where Paul is the teacher. He's nice. He has white or gray hair and isn't too tall or too short. He talks good. Sometimes, there is a screen with a list of things to do and nice pretty ladies. There are also songs, any kind of songs. I like singing along to songs. We sing different songs with a karaoke machine in the Group Home. Last time I did karaoke was at my niece's wedding. I sang "Girl Crush," by Little Big Town.

The Group Home is kind of brown, and it is made out of brick. There are a lot of windows, and everybody has their own room. In my room, I have a dresser, a bed, and a TV. I watch the Spanish channel (I understand some Spanish). The reason I watch it is because it has ladies on it.

*

My whole family, and some people in the group home, are Catholic. And I've been good at it. No meat on Fridays. We went to church on March 1, Ash Wednesday, already. In the church bulletin, there is a picture of me and my Mom. My Mom lit a small candle in the church in Mendon by hitting a button. There is also a picture of my brother John with my Mom. These pictures are in the bulletin because my Mom is a Starlight recipient for the first time, which means that she is being honored by the parish. I have two Starlight awards already.

Mom's birthday is September 14, which is the anniversary of when I started working at Web Seal Inc. (Talking about birthday's, mine is March 14). This year, my Mom will be 90. She still has the same personality, I

know that. When I would go on vacation a long time ago, she would come, too, with me and my sister. She is outgoing, like me, and not shy. She reads books. Different kinds. I don't know the names, but I know she does. She's talkative sometimes, but not all the time. She likes to talk about family.

My Mom is kind of short, and maybe has blue eyes. I think she does. She wears glasses, too. She wears casual clothes, like pants, and she dresses casual for church. Her favorite color is probably green. Her hair is kind of white. She likes watching golf, the news, and horse races.

I always make my Mom laugh. On April Fool's Day, I tell her jokes. One time, I told her I was getting married. She didn't believe me. Another time, I told her she had a flat tire. Also, that the registration sticker on the front window of her car was expired. It was a joke. I wonder what I'll do this year. I'll think about it. I think I'm going to tell everybody that I have a wife, a kid, and a car. I will say Abby, from Inspiration Project, is my wife. My kid is a boy, maybe named Chris. And if she was a girl, it would be named Julianne. Maybe my car would be a green Chevy. My Mom and I like to tease each other, yeah we do. I'm so excited about April Fool's. I think people will laugh at some stuff in this story. I know they will.

*

I've got a lot of siblings. Like maybe ten? We all grew up in Mendon. We had a big house, all ten of us. It was me and my brother in bunk beds, for a long time. The living room was bigger. In the living room, we had a couch and a fireplace on nice cold days. During the holidays, we had a real Christmas tree. It drank a lot of water. That's a way of losing weight, drinking a lot of water.

My Mom did a lot of cooking, and we had pets. We had two horses, and maybe

two rabbits, and there were some cats and kittens, and we had a barn for horses. We had three dogs, Irish Setters. All three of them. What I liked was the pool. We had an outdoor pool and we did a lot of parties. I used to have to sweep, vacuum, and clean the pool. The water in the pool was a kind of bright, darker blue. We played games in the pool, too. Like Marco Polo.

This was a long time ago. We had a lot of parties, and we celebrated the holidays, when my father was there—he's not around anymore. He passed away. A long time ago, my father was the boss at Web Seal Inc., before he died. He started the company. We sold the house after he died, to somebody else. It was a big house. And we had a pickup truck, a van, and maybe two cars. Like the blue Buick. We used the blue Buick for a funeral and a wedding. The bride and the groom rode in the back of the Buick. We also used it for my dad's sister's funeral. It was a good car.



What I liked was having a cookout with burgers and hot dogs. I've been doing the cooking on the grill at the Group Home, which I learned from my father. In the old house, we had a porch. I loved the porch, and I would sleep there in the summertime. We celebrated Easter. We hid the eggs—not

eggs that you eat, but the ones with candy—and my sister would hide so many outside, and we would try to find them.

I think we all miss the old house. I miss feeding the horses and the cats. The horses ate hay and oats and the cats ate cat food.

One thing I do miss, but I don't do anymore, is shoveling and mowing the lawn. I would shovel the back sidewalk and the front sidewalk. And the driveway. And raking leaves, too. I like shoveling snow. It's kind of like working out.

I also went to school, out in Fairport. We did something inside with shoes that had wheels on them, kind of like a sport or game. I liked it, but I would fall. Once, I twisted my left knee.

*

The change. My Mom is only 89. Mom is not sick, just getting older. Sometimes, Mary or Julie will take me food shopping, and my Mom will come with us. We buy stuff for dinner, and I eat with her at her apartment. They also take my Mom to appointments, like the dentist, (the dentist is not that far from her apartment) or the hair salon, or her book club. I don't know what kind of books she reads there. She's still doing that, so somebody needs to take her.

Like I said, I see her every Saturday. Sometimes, she doesn't go shopping with us when she has her shopping done. But sometimes we do go together, when the weather's good. I wanted to get my stuff, and I use my money, but when my Mom was out of work once, I used my money to pay for her groceries. And why not? There's nothing wrong with that. She forgot to buy milk.

She doesn't work now at all. I think that is new. I think she likes being retired. She was working at a place for old people for a long time. She would do stuff; she

would give people their food, and wash the sheets for the bed. She liked working there, but she doesn't do it anymore.

One of my sisters helps her in the apartment she lives in now to wash her sheets and my sheets. I have a bed in her apartment. Sometimes, my brother Tim comes home from New York for the holidays, and he stays there, too. Last mother's day, I made breakfast-for-lunch for her and my sisters, and I made some eggs, and maybe sausage. They liked it. I know how to cook. And one of my sisters helped me to cook it.

I like my Mom's apartment. It is brick, too. The outside is. Inside there is wood and a black and white carpet. The carpet was kind of gray before, but now it's not. We got a new one. Now it's kind of black and white. It looks kind of like a computer keyboard. She also has a TV, and so do I in my room in her apartment, but we mostly have dinner together. Sometimes we have company there, like my brother and sister and their wife and husband. The apartment is a pretty good size. We do the holidays, too. My older sister, Mary, does Thanksgiving, and my brother John does Christmas Eve at his house. On Christmas Day, we do it at my Mom's apartment. For Christmas, we have beef, potatoes, and pumpkin or apple pie.

*

My sister Julie and my brother John think I need to go to CP Rochester on Mondays. That don't bother me. I kind of like it. 'Cause we're doing different classes now at the program. Julie and John are also the ones who decided my Mom shouldn't drive, and I told them I agreed with them. We all did.

John is my boss at Web Seal Inc. I do a lot of stuff at work. I know I'm not allowed to say it, but I'll tell you. I am the

president of the company. My brother and sister are everybody's boss, but the other workers picked me to be president.

Soon, my Mom will be moving to St. John's home, a retirement community, which is close to the group home. I don't know when, but probably some time in June. That, we did talk about as a family, together, at my brother John's house. We're having another family meeting soon.

My Mom won't be driving, but I see this bus that says "St. Johns," so when she goes shopping she can take that bus. The outside of St. John's is kind of nice, different from brick. It's darker colors. Maybe some night, I'll go over to have dinner with her. That means I would have to ask one of the staff members at the group home to take me there. I know they will, I'll make them.

*

I want to write this about my Mom because she's moving to a different place, and she's important to me. Because she feeds me. But also because she's nice. Writing this is about friendship. We do a lot of stuff, like going shopping, and I enjoy doing that because she's not allowed to carry heavy stuff, and I can. I do help her because I don't want her to fall. I don't want her to get hurt because I care about her. She can push the cart, but I carry the heavy stuff, like the milk. Or potatoes, those are heavy, too. Shopping is my favorite thing to do with my Mom. I think it is one of her favorite things to do, too.

I thought a lot about what I was going to write. And it will be kind of sad, I know that. When she moves. It is kind of sad when you move. It just is. Like, it was me and Mom in Mendon, and we moved, and we packed a lot of stuff and furniture. A lot of stuff. We got rid of some things. But not the pool. You can't pack that. It won't

fit. It's full of water. It was a big house, I know that. I was living with my Mom and my father out in Mendon for a long time. My Mom moving now reminds me of moving from Mendon.

This story is for everybody here, all of the staff, all of you. I like being here. I love writing, yeah I do. I like it because I

like making stories. And being funny. This story is different because in the other ones I wrote, I was talking about my trips. This one's about me and my sister, and my Mom, and her moving. And the rest of my family. Everybody at Inspiration Project is nice and happy.



Murder at Moonstone High: The Rumor Mill Story

By Ann Kurz

In collaboration with Anna Alden



The spot shines center-stage on the lifeless body strewn as a prop on the dusty floor. Six cops and a crime lab photographer are doing a seemingly choreographed milling around the stage. Gasps silence the actors' chit-chat as they file into the high school auditorium while echoes of whispers fill the cavernous space.

"Who?"

"What?"

"Why?"

"How?"

"How could it be?"

"Suicide? So sad!"

"Really, murder? You think? Like that?"

"Brent? You mean - our stagehand - Brent? Brent Kincade?"

"Oh, dear God, no!"

As the actors gather in small groups, they see Director Simon Montgomery sitting on the edge of the stage with his head hanging down. Brushing his auburn bangs to one side, he stands and is met by an officer from upstage. Facing the auditorium, he lifts his arms into the air. "Settle down, folks! Could everyone please be seated? I have some sad news to share. Unfortunately, as

you can see behind me, I discovered Brent Kincade dead onstage about two hours ago. I called the police who are finishing their initial investigation now. From first glance, it seems an apparent suicide. But, because we were probably the last to see Brent last night, the police would like to talk with each of us to see if we can shed any light on the circumstances surrounding his death.”

Amidst the idle murmurs from the cast, a strikingly tall, ultra-slender woman stands, swishing her waist-length, coal black hair over her shoulder. Her patrician voice cuts through the increasing chatter like a bolt of lightning. “What a revolting development! I can’t be expected to dawdle around here all day, waiting to answer questions about someone I hardly knew. I have things to do, places to go, people to see. I should go first. After all, I’m Rav-”

A gaggle of chorus girls interrupts, mimicking the woman. “I’m Raven Valentino, heiress of the Italian publisher Valentino Volumes, and the star of the show.”

Simon sighs, his shoulders drooping in disappointment over his wife’s callousness and the girls’ bratty ways. “Good grief, Raven! Ladies! Show some respect. A man has died here - One of our own.”

“Pardon me. Ms. Valentino,” says the officer. “Our intent is to make these preliminary interviews as quick as possible. However, we’d like to start with the last person to see the deceased alive.”

“And that would be the stage manager, Charlie Parker...unless, Raven, you stayed to help Charlie and Brent adjust the rigging last night,” Simon smugly interjects.

Raven slumps contentiously into her seat as Charlie kisses his wife Hannah comfortingly on her cheek before rising to join the officer. All eyes follow Charlie as he rubs his palms on his jeans and walks

dutifully down front to the piano where the officer has set up a makeshift office.

Uncontrollable weeping draws the actors’ eyes away from Charlie into the middle of their group where they find Ashley Stevens, a featured tenor soloist, distraught, cradling his face in his hands. “Why? Why now? It’s appalling...Just when we...”

Hannah, who is in the row behind Ashley, hands him some Kleenex and wraps her arms around his shoulders. “Oh, Ashley, I’m so sorry. Is there anyone I can call or anything I can do to help?”

The more Hannah tries to comfort Ashley, the more his sobs heave him forward and make him gasp for air. “I think I’m going to be sick!”

With that, Raven flings herself around in her seat. “Geez! Enough with the theatrics already! Yeah, we’re all shocked to see someone in our midst die, but who was Brent anyway? You hardly knew him. In fact, none of us knew him that well. He mostly kept to himself. He almost always looked so down and out, so dismal. Perhaps killing himself was his way out, a way to gain happiness.”

Ashley stands, his face a runny mess, and hurls the wad of Kleenex at Raven. Wagging his finger at Raven, he snaps, “How can you suggest that? Yeah, you’re right; you don’t know him. But, I do! I know for sure that he has more heart and more love for life than most people. He just doesn’t show it. I can’t believe he’d kill himself. Someone murdered him, and when I find out who did, I’ll...I’ll...Simon, I’ve got to go.” Without waiting for Simon to respond, Ashley grabs his coat and scurries up the aisle, letting the doors clang shut behind him.

Charlie’s wail of dismay pulls the cast’s attention back toward the piano. “What? Murdered? You think I murdered Brent? No!”

* * * * *

Over the next few days, how Brent Kincade died becomes the main topic of conversation for the Moonstone Follies' actors and stage crew, all alumni of Moonstone High.

"Oh my god, I can't believe Brent died! He was such a nice guy."

"Why would he commit suicide?"

"You think he killed himself?"

"Yeah, I do. Don't you?"

"Simon said that it was an apparent suicide, so that's what I believe."

"Raven was adamant that Brent fit the suicide type. A pathetic loner, she called him."

"C'mon now. What does Raven know?"

"I don't know?"

"I think he was murdered."

"If he was murdered, where's the smoking gun?"

"Did he leave a suicide note?"

"Does everyone who kills himself leave a suicide note?"

"But what if it wasn't suicide?"

"Ashley sure doesn't believe Brent killed himself."

"Who'd kill him then? I can't believe it'd be one of us."

"Oh you can't, can you? Like none of us has axes to grind?"

"I heard that the police suspect Charlie."

"He doesn't have an alibi."

"Wasn't Hannah with Charlie and Brent that night?"

"Yes she was, but Charlie sent her to the car to wait for him."

"What about Raven? She claims she went out to the bar after rehearsal, but I don't remember seeing her there until later."

* * * * *

A few days later, after a late rehearsal night, Simon and Raven chat about the Follies while sipping their morning coffee and munching on breakfast bars.

"You know, Simon, you could stick up for me - your wife."

"It seems like you do a good job of that yourself. You don't need me."

"You're always recognizing Hannah. 'Good timing, Hannah!,' 'Awesome projection, Hannah!'" or "Hannah, could you go over the tap number with the girls?" It's like you have a crush on her - like when you were juniors at Moonstone."

"Really, Raven? We've come a long way since then. That's a lot of water under the bridge. I would never break up a happy marriage. As far as Hannah's concerned, she's a natural, picking up choreography right away and adding her own flare. Yet she doesn't get the credit she deserves. It's my responsibility as director to draw out and nurture that talent."

"I'm just saying..."

"If you want to go that route, I could ask you about all your fussing over Ashley. It's 'Ashley, this' and 'Ashley, that', 'Ashley, Ashley, Ashley!' Not only does your swooning make me feel like Rhett Butler vying for Scarlett's attention but it makes me wonder what the former Moonstone homecoming king and queen are up to these days."

Placing her forefingers on her cheeks where dimples should be and smiling brightly, Raven impersonates Scarlett's southern accent, "Well, fiddle-dee-dee! I do declare! Simon Montgomery, you're jealous!"

Simon waves off Raven's contrived cuteness. "Seriously, Raven. Ever since we learned that we can't get pregnant because of me, you've been extremely distant with me, but you can't seem to get close enough to Ashley. That is, until the morning we

found Brent's body...when you lambasted Ashley. You couldn't have been much colder to him."

The ringing of the phone silences Raven's retort as Simon draws out his cell phone from his jeans pocket to answer it. "Yes...Yes, I see...Huh-huh...Ashley, Raven, and Charlie...Right."

As Simon hangs up the phone, he sighs tiredly, throwing his hands into the air and casting a concerned glance at Raven.

* * * * *

"It's official!"

"What's official?"

"Brent was murdered."

"Murdered?"

"Murdered."

"By whom?"

"They're investigating it now."

"They must have suspects."

"Yeah, Ashley, Raven, and Charlie."

"I can't see Ashley killing him."

"He doesn't fit the type. He also doesn't seem to have a motive in my eyes."

"Raven probably has some kind of motive."

"But would she want blood on her hands?"

"Maybe it's Charlie..."

"Charlie?"

"Charlie."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, at the Parkers' home, Hannah is tidying the kitchen after getting their two sons and daughter off to swim practice. Sitting at the table, Charlie yawns, rubbing his eyes in an effort to wake up. Joining him at the table, Hannah raises her eyebrows in concern. "Rough night, Charlie?"

"I tossed and turned all night, having a recurring dream that you and the kids were

visiting me in jail. I could see you in tears and raggedy clothes, but we couldn't hear each other. I couldn't comfort you."

Hannah reached across the corner of the table to caress his cheek and then took his hand. "Honey, how terrible and exhausting! But, it's just a dream. That's not going to happen."

"But murder, Hannah? It's been a week and there's still no evidence clearing my name."

"And, as far as I know, there's no evidence that you did murder Brent. It's only been a week."

"I just can't fathom that they think I, of all people, killed Brent! Me, a murderer? I can't even kill a fly!"

"If only I'd stayed with you in the auditorium that night, you'd be cleared. You weren't even in there two minutes before you came out."

"Yeah, the only thing that we had left to do was turn off the house and some back stage lights. It gets pretty dark in there, so I wanted you to leave while you could still see. Brent and I were just about to turn off the last lights when we heard a rustle. I was going to check it out, but Brent said that I shouldn't keep you waiting and that he'd check that everything was secured. So, I said good-bye and left. That was the last that I saw him."

"Hmmm... You didn't mention hearing the rustling before. What kind of noise was it? Did it sound like paper crinkling or some beads falling to the floor?"

"No, it sounded more like a long skirt swooshing against the curtain - like when all you girls coming running offstage after your *Shall We Dance* number."

Just then, Charlie's phone vibrates loudly on the table, jolting them away from their thoughts. Picking up and looking at his phone, Charlie furrows his brow.

"Ashley? What's up?"

Listening to Ashley, Charlie walks quickly upstairs to dress. When he comes down, he grabs his coat and car keys and kisses Hannah brusquely on her cheek. “Hon, I’m meeting Ashley at the Princess. He has an idea about how we can clear our names. I’ll fill you in later.”

* * * * *

At the Princess, Charlie surveys the diner, finds Ashley at a back booth, and quickly slides onto the bench opposite him. “Hey, Ash!”

Ashley fumbles with his water glass, nearly spilling water across the table. “Hey, yourself. Thanks for rushing over to meet me. Are you as jittery about this murder investigation as I am?”

Charlie covers his face with his burly hands and rubs his eyes feverishly. “I’m exhausted, I can’t sleep, I jolt awake at the slightest noise. I never thought I would be a murder suspect.”

“Yeah, me neither. I feel like I’m all alone. There’s no one to defend me.”

“Ash, I seriously doubt you’re really a suspect. You’re probably just a decoy. You don’t seem like the murdering type. I’d never peg you for a murderer.”

“Yeah, you either. That’s why I called you here. We’re both desperate to clear our names, so why don’t we hire a P.I.?”

“That’s a great idea. Do you have anyone in mind?”

Ashley hesitates and winces like he’s afraid to tell Charlie. “Urrr...Yeah...Sparky.”

“Sparky? Are you kidding me?” Charlie slams his fist down on the table, making their silverware jump and clang together. “She’s such a bumbling idiot!”

Ashley holds out his hand to calm Charlie down. “She may be bumbling but she’s no dummy. Remember, she was

salutatorian of our class?”

“But Sparky? She’s...”

“Well, if it isn’t good ol’ Charlie Parker?” Dressed in a form-fitting, red spandex dress and platform shoes, Sparky swaggers titillatingly towards their table until she twists her ankle and topples with a plop next to Charlie in the booth.

As he reaches out a hand to steady her, Charlie’s eyes throw daggers at Ashley. “Sparky! Long time, no see! You haven’t changed a bit!”

“You either, muscle man. I see you’ve kept your football player physique,” Sparky says as she squeezes Charlie’s biceps and Charlie leans away from her.

Following a few awkward seconds where the threesome takes turns glancing at each other and then into space, Ashley breaks the silence. “So, Sparky, what d’ya think? Will ya take our case?”

“Honey, I was on it from the moment you called. I already got my connection with the cops to snag copies of the crime photos and police report. After looking at them, I sense there’s something fishy going on with the stage floor immediately surrounding Brent’s body. Whereas the rest of the floor is dusty - as most are, the area around his body looks dust-mopped or like someone dragged a damp towel on the floor. Yet, there seems to be something granular in that area, something metallic that reflects the spotlight in places?”

“Could they be sequins? They’re always falling off costumes,” Ashley suggests.

“No, there are too many of them to be a random piece from a costume. They’re not blingy enough. They look more like metal filings from a drill or saw.”

Charlie nods. “Yeah, the other day when I was sweeping up, I saw something like what you’re describing. I’d wondered what the set designers were working on this soon before the performances. And, they’re

usually meticulous about cleaning up after themselves.”

“Sparky, did the police report say anything about how Brent died?”

“It suggests he fell - possibly from the catwalk - but they didn’t find any segment of the catwalk around him. So, they’re supposing that he fell or was pushed over the railing.”

Charlie sighs, puzzled. “I find that hard to believe. The catwalk railing is pretty high for someone to fall or be tossed over it. And, Brent knew what he was doing working up there. I don’t buy that he’d just fall accidentally.”

Sparky rolls her eyes at their naivete. “Neither do the cops - since they’ve ruled his death a murder. Has anyone inspected the catwalk since Brent’s fall?”

Charlie shrugs, “I thought that the school would, but I don’t know if they’ve gotten around to it yet.”

“Well, it’s high time that we mosey over to the auditorium and have a look-see. Who knows that you’ve hired me?”

Ashley shakes his head. “No one.”

“When I left to come here, I promised Hannah that I’d fill her in afterwards. Other than that, I don’t need to tell anyone else.”

“Good, let’s leave it with only Hannah in the know. The less people who know, the easier it’ll be to flush out what actually happened. I’ll let Simon know that I’ll write a piece about the Follies for *The Post* - my other freelance job - and tell him that I’d like to observe a rehearsal. How can he turn down free publicity?” Sparky gathers up her purse and coat and blows kisses at the guys as she saunters towards the door. “Toot-a-loo, peeps!”

* * * * *

Sparky strolls to center-stage and circles the area where Brent’s body had lain,

oblivious to the cast entering the auditorium for the last week of rehearsal.

“Who is that on stage?”

“Is it a new cast member?”

“How could they add a new actor so late in the game?”

“She doesn’t look like an actor the way she’s surveying the stage. You’d think she’s never been onstage before.”

“Wait a minute...”

“Could it be?”

“I’d know that strut anywhere.”

“Sparky?”

“Sparky?”

“Oh my gosh, Sparky!”

“Well, if it isn’t Mildred Sparks,”

Raven said coolly as she sashayed up the stage steps. “I wouldn’t think you’d want to put yourself back in front of an audience after your disastrous attempts as a cheerleader.”

“Nah, unlike you, I’ve learned to avoid the spotlight, working behind the scenes instead.”

“So, what brings you center-stage now?”

“What? Oh, oh...” Sparky falters as other cast members greet and hug her.

“Hiya, guys! My, it’s like being back on the ranch!”

Raven reels Sparky back in. “Were you feeling lonely and thought you’d meet up with some ol’ friends here?”

“Me? Lonely? Never! I’d heard that Follies ticket sales had gone south since the murder, so I’m dusting off my freelance writer hat and offering Simon some free publicity.”

“Ah, I see. Still jack of all trades and master of none?”

“It’s better than lounging around, eating bonbons all day long.”

Sensing a cat fight brewing, Simon steps in. “OK, people, let’s get situated. We’ve got a long tech rehearsal ahead of us. Sparky here is going to be observing,

collecting facts and quotes for an article in *The Post*. OK, places for the opening number. Charlie, curtain down. Main spot on. Incidental music starts.”

Backstage, Charlie gazes upwards, pulling hand over hand on the thickly twisted, coarse rope to drop the curtain. An unusual sparkle embedded high up in the rope catches Charlie’s attention. His eyes affix to it as it descends, streaking a trail of light like a shooting star. Charlie slows his pulling and stops the rope on its circuitous route when the glittering thing is just above his head. Waving Hannah over as nonchalantly as possible on the dimly lit stage, Charlie whispers loudly to her, “Tell Sparky she’s needed backstage.”

Meanwhile, Simon shouts from the house, “Charlie, the curtain needs to be lowered about a foot more.”

“Yeah, Simon, technical difficulties... Just run with it for now.”

As Simon responds, Sparky appears next to Charlie. “Hey, what’s up?”

Charlie points up at the rope. “Found a buried treasure.”

Sparky squints and stands on her tiptoes. “Can you bring it down a bit more? But, be careful not to touch it.” As Charlie tugs gently on the rope, Sparky searches her purse for her cell phone, tweezers, and a plastic bag. “Do you have any tape?”

“Yeah, electrical?”

Sparky nods, “That’ll do. After I remove this beauty, mark the rope with a piece of tape.” With the sparkling item now at eye level, she snaps a few shots, extricates it with the tweezers from the hemp and and slips it into the bag.

Flipping the bag over and staring at the object, Sparky and Charlie look like kids who have just discovered the prized scavenger hunt clue. Charlie shines his flashlight on the bag and says, “Well, well, well! What do we have here? A dangling

gold heart earring, surrounded by a cluster of moonstones and engraved with a ‘V’. Hmm, ‘V’? Va- len- ti- no?”

Raising her eyebrow, Sparky looks quizzically at Charlie, amazed at his forte with jewelry description. “Right! But, not only that, look what else we nabbed...A few knotted strands of long, black hair.”

“Bingo!” Charlie starts to reach for his phone.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“Calling the cops. This proves that...”

“Not so fast, Hercule Poirot! This proves nothing - except that Raven has been onstage for rehearsals. How far up did this earring come from?”

“Pretty high. I’d been pulling on the rope for a while. Probably the catwalk area.”

Charlie’s and Sparky’s eyes widen. “Then, let’s go!” Sparky pulls Charlie towards the stairs as he instructs a stagehand to raise the curtain.

At the top of the stairs, Sparky pushes ahead and Charlie grabs her shirt. “Whoa! Whoa! Not in those stilettos, Miss Marple! Take those heels off! This is my territory; I’ll lead. You can follow, but slowly! We don’t want any other mishaps here.”

Charlie steps cautiously onto the catwalk, shifting his weight gently from one foot to the other to test its stability. Satisfied that they won’t plunge to the floor below, he turns to look at the proximity of the curtain’s draw-rope to the catwalk. There, staring him in the face was the piece of yellow electrical tape that he’d used to mark the rope moments before. “Sparky, look! There it is, and the rope practically grazes the railing.”

“If someone was leaning over the railing, her earring could have easily caught in the rope, especially if the earring was loose after a struggle. Let’s go on,” Sparky nudges Charlie further onto the catwalk.

As Charlie walks slowly onward, testing the railings and scrutinizing the riggings, nothing appears to be tampered with until he reaches the point above centerstage. He immediately stops cold, grabbing the back railing and flailing his other arm to the side to prevent Sparky from squeezing by. "Geez, the center section of the front railing has fallen away and is hanging down. It's only attached at the bottom. I'm going to look at the end of the railing where the part broke away. You stay here. Not another step, you hear?" Sparky nods solemnly as he edges carefully forward.

Charlie peers suspiciously at the railing and rubs his thumb over the end. Kneeling, he swings up the hanging piece of railing, studying how this end joins the end that he's just felt. After using the detached piece to barricade the section with no railing, he returns to Sparky. "It's been jaggedly cut. The ends are serrated and there's gritty filings clinging to the sharp edges. When I butt the ends together, I can see slivers of light where the metal has been gnawed away.. The top of the railing near the ends are all scratched, too. I'd say that someone did a horrendous job cutting through this railing - someone with little experience using a saw."

"In other words, someone did a hack job with a hacksaw?" Sparky snorted, trying to lighten Charlie's grim mood.

"Would ya cut it with the puns already? What are we going to do now?"

"Spin a web and wait for our fly to fall prey." To Charlie's confused stare, Sparky continues, "C'mon, let's get down from here before my acrophobia gets the better of me. Then, I'll tell you my plan."

* * * * *

"Something odd was going on during our rehearsal yesterday."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Charlie wasn't on his A-game."

"Yeah, he seemed distracted."

"By Sparky, no less!"

"I thought they couldn't stand each other in high school."

"They couldn't... or at least Charlie couldn't stand her!"

"But, they were pretty buddy-buddy last night."

"Do they have a thing?"

"Nah."

"If Sparky was there to write an article about the show, why did she spend so much time backstage with Charlie?"

"Yeah, on the catwalk, too!"

"That doesn't make sense."

"Maybe she's writing an article about the stage crew?"

"What if her writing an article is a ruse? I have her card: 'Mildred Sparks, P.I.'"

"Oh, that makes more sense."

"Seems like they found something?"

"Yeah, a piece of jewelry."

"A bracelet?"

"A necklace?"

"Some kind of charm?"

"Did you see Raven try to sneak a peak?"

"They wouldn't let her."

"She stomped off, smoke streaming from her ears."

"I wouldn't want her for an enemy."

* * * * *

As Simon gives the cast instructions at rehearsal the next day, Sparky strides in, trailing two police officers. "Sorry, Simon, to interrupt. We're here on official business - to arrest Charlie Parker for the murder of Brent Kincade."

"What?" roars Charlie amidst gasps from the cast.

"No, Sparky, you said you'd clear my husband's name!" Hannah cries, hugging Charlie in support.

"Sorry, Hannah. Sorry, Charlie. You had motive. You admitted to me that Brent was an excellent stage hand. You thought he had the expertise to replace you as stage manager - a job that you love.

"Simon gave you the perfect opportunity to be alone with Brent the night he died. You couldn't have planned it better yourself.

"And, you had access to the tools to set and then cover up the murder. The only thing you didn't have were the smarts to hold it all together. You started to fall apart when Simon discovered Brent's body before you had a chance to remove all the evidence from the stage."

Spotting Raven chomping at the bit to add her two cents, Sparky takes a breath to allow her facts to sink in, thus giving Raven the opportunity to blurt out, "Charlie's just a dumb football player. I saw him yesterday pointing out all the clues he left. He probably even led you to the saw he used to cut the railing."

"Excuse me? I didn't hear you clearly. What did you say?" Sparky leans forward, calmly egging Raven on.

"Uh...Charlie probably led you to the saw?"

"But how do you know there was a saw? Charlie and I only learned that the railing was sawn last night. I'm pretty sure that neither of us told you."

Raven pulls her hair off her forehead in an effort to cool her beet red face.

"Well... well... umm... It was a lucky guess."

"No, Raven, you know more than you want to admit. You don't have an alibi for the night Brent died. You showed up at the bar an hour late, upset because you lost one of your earrings."

"How do you know I lost an earring?"

"A friend of yours mentioned it in her statement to police. Charlie and I found that earring embedded in the curtain's rope last night. An educated guess would be that you lost it while struggling with Brent."

"What motive would I have to kill Brent? I hardly even..."

Unable to keep his emotions in check any longer, Ashley jumps from his seat and points accusingly at Raven. "Don't play that Little Miss Innocent routine now! I know of a darn good reason for your killing Brent. A few months ago, you tried to rekindle our high school romance because you're desperate to have a baby and Simon's sterile."

The cast gasps, but with hot tears streaming down his face, Ashley pushes on. "You were upset with me when I wouldn't oblige, but you totally lost it when I confessed my love for Brent. These past few months, you've been trying to drive a wedge between Brent and me, probably hoping that I'd eventually drop him for you. When we wouldn't budge, I suspect you took a more drastic route to get rid of him permanently."

Raven's eyes dart from Ashley to Sparky to Charlie and Hannah, seeking some support. Finally, her eyes come to rest on Simon, her unfailing refuge. "Please, Simon, do something! Stop them from making these ridiculous accusations!"

Simon shakes his head, his face ashen with disbelief and sorrow. "Sorry, Raven. Not this time. I've been there for you from the first time we met, but you're always running to others for help. I'm done." Simon's shoulders sag as he turns away.

Raven sobs uncontrollably as the officers approach her. "Raven Valentino, you're under arrest for the murder of Brent Kincade." Reading her the Miranda rights, they lead her away.

As the lights fade and the curtain descends, the cast begins gossiping one last time.

“I can’t believe it! Can you?”

“That’s what desperation can do.”

“But how heartless!”

“What will happen to Raven?”

“Do you think she’ll be sentenced to life?”

“Maybe she’ll enter an insanity plea.”

“I don’t really care.”

“Me, neither.”

“Say, did you meet that new stage hand?”

“Yeah, he seems a bit high-strung.”

“What’s up with him?”

“Well, I heard...”

The curtain reaches the floor, and the audience applauds, rising to their feet, satisfied that the murder mystery was solved and no harm came to the rumor mill at Moonstone High.



Toni's Dream

By Toni Montgomery
In collaboration with Becca Reef



A girl named Toni living in Atlanta met all of the Real Housewives that lived there. But unfortunately, she didn't like them very much because they caused too much drama. Toni only liked three people in the whole big city: Kandy, Phaedra and Cynthia. She decided to have a Girls' Night with them at her big mansion.

They talked about their lives for the whole night. They talked about Portia Williams, a girl who has pretty hair but a bad attitude. The girls didn't like to hang out with her because she liked to talk about Kandy in a negative way.

One time, long ago, Portia was telling lies about Kandy to Toni. Toni stood up and said "no one talks about our best

friend like that!" Afterwards, there was a huge pillow fight. It got really intense! Feathers from the pillows were flying around everywhere.

After that, new people that were friends with the Housewives arrived at Toni's mansion in a big, cool party bus. The party bus had two sides: men's side and ladies' side. When Toni and her friends found out that new people arrived, they came downstairs to check them out. When the guests walked up to the door, they had to stop at a big, pretty glass wall. Toni's trusted bodyguards at the door took their IDs, wrote down their names and read them aloud so that Toni could decide if she was going to let them inside.

After the announcement, it was time for Toni's big decision. But then, Toni let her best friend Cynthia decide who came in. Cynthia proclaimed that they could come inside only on one condition. That condition was: they had to give a true, emotional story about their lives before they stepped into the house - and they had to act it out. Toni, her friends, and her bodyguards took a vote and then had a fight about this. Once they decided, they relaxed on the white marble floor with a pink carpet in the entry of her home while the people prepared their stories and acts.

They decided to have a big dinner with all of Toni's favorite foods. At the dinner, people took turns telling stories. People talked about their family, friends, where they were from, what they liked to do, children, pets, and things that were special to them. Toni, who was sitting at the head of the table because she was queen of the house, clinked a glass to get everyone's attention. Once everyone's eyes were on Toni, she presented something very special to her. She ran across the room, threw her hands in the air, and pointed at her beloved boyfriend Michael. She loved him because he gave her lots of gifts and love. She loved him because he was a DJ, and it was cool to go to parties with him. He bought her a pink bedroom set. Michael even wrote her a song.

All of a sudden, Michael got down on one knee and pulled out an emerald ring for Toni. He asked her to marry him in front of all of her favorite people. She couldn't wait to start planning her wedding! She wanted it to be all pink, and Michael was okay with that because he loved her. She wanted it to be in a really pretty park and get married under an arch of pink flowers. There would be a big party after.

Everyone in the room thought that it was so cute that her boyfriend was so special to her. But he wasn't the only thing that was special to her. Her big, pink car was very

special to her. She even had a chauffeur that drove her around and open the door for her. Not only did she have a chauffeur, but she had a chef too. But, everyone in the room already knew that because the food that they were eating at dinner was the best that they had ever had in their lives.

Another thing that was special to Toni was the bookstore that she owned. Toni's bookstore was right in the house so she could go whenever she wanted. Sometimes she made a surprise appearance and signed autographs in the books that she wrote for her guests. The books had glass on them to protect them because they meant a lot to Toni.

Toni's bookstore was so important to her because she loved to write in her journal, and more importantly, write true stories. She loved to read them as well. Her last guests, Tyler Perry and Oprah, starred in Toni's favorite book. Toni had so many books that they were overflowing on the shelves. She was going to have to open another bookstore. When she opened a new store, she wanted it to be locked with a pink key.

One of her favorite true stories is about March 24 - a very sentimental day for Toni because it marks the anniversary of her mom's passing. Toni and her mom, Christine Williams, were very close when she was young and even closer as she grew up. She's a very special person in Toni's heart. One of Toni's favorite memories of her mom include the times that they cooked and baked together. Her mom's sweet potato pie was her favorite, she also loved her greens and cornbread. After they were done, if the sun was shining, they sat on the porch outside and talked about everything together. They also went shopping together, and watched TV and movies together. Toni's mom always gave her hugs. Toni's mom was very religious, they went to church together and went to her aunt's house for Easter dinner one year.

If Toni could describe her mom in three words, she would choose “love,” “patience,” and “selfless.” Toni really looked up to her mom. Her mom loved to dress up, she always looked really nice. Toni tries to dress really nicely too, she always wear fashionable, pretty color clothes. Toni’s mom would be proud of her because she loved her daughter Toni very much. Toni’s mom always told her to “be good” and she has been. Also, Toni thinks her mom would be proud that she is very respectful towards people, and she has a lot of dreams and goals.

One of these goals is to write her own book. Toni’s mom didn’t know about this, but Toni thinks that she inherited her

mother’s love of reading. Another one of Toni’s goals is to continue cooking, like she and her mom used to. She’s become a better cook every year, learning new recipes and perfecting her favorite dish: ribs. Her mom left her beautiful, glittering china dishes which inspire her. The most important thing about Toni’s mom was that she was her friend. Toni used to tell her everything. She wished that she could give her mom her book, but she was happy to sell it in her bookstore for her friends and autograph it for them. Most of all, she was thankful that God gave her so many great memories to write about. She is already thinking about her next book.



Poems

By Thaun Nguyen
In collaboration with Emily Landau



I Open the Door

You open the door for me to come with happiness.
You know how I feel about you.
When the morning comes, we go out to the garden.
We talk.
I listen to the wind.
I listen to the sounds.
The wind sounds.
After the garden, I look for your window.
I know you.
I'm looking for the window.
I know.
When I come to you, you open the door for me to come in with happiness.
We sit by the garden and talk.
I look for the window.
I know you from the inside.

You're so kind.
We go out to the boat by the ocean.
We listen to the sound of the water.
Up up and down.
I saw the whale.
We talked through the night.
When the morning comes, I sit at the table with the candle.
I say to you I love you.
I have fun with you.
When the morning comes, the sun rises.
The sun makes me remember the time we met.
I come to you with the sunrise.

Ship

I met you at the US ship
I remember what you said
I remember the ships went out of the ocean
The ship with the nuclear power to fight in the war
I remember my father went to the bow of a ship
He is a good man
He helps people who need help
My father went to the war in Vietnam
He is the captain
He teaches people how to fight
The nuclear power is fighting the war
Not only to Vietnam, he goes everywhere
He is training the ship on how to fight
He was on the ship for thirty days
There were 6 or 7 thousand people on his ship
He comes to Vietnam every 6 months to see my mother, me, and my 2 sisters
He comes to the Phillipines
My father rides the ship back and forth
I remember the morning my father took my sister to the ship
She saw everything on that ship
My father is not only fighting in Vietnam
He is fighting where they call him
I remember the United States was helping
My father was in the Navy for 50 years
After, my father cooked made food for the Navy
He took care of me, my mother, and my 2 sisters
When the war was over, he said he would be back to take my family home
When he knew he couldn't come back, he sent a letter to my mother
The last time I saw him was 1985
I stayed in Vietnam

When the war was over, my sister went to see him in the United States
He worked for the United States, but I was in Vietnam
I never saw my father after the war
My sister saw him

Father, Son the Holy Spirit comes down from Heaven to be with Me and the Whole World

Father comes down from up there in heaven
Wisdom, hope
Open my heart
Open my mind
Open my eyes
Open my ears
From the outside inside
To see from the inside outside
Father leaving me here
You know what's wrong right
To follow your work
I help someone who gets me into trouble
I know you
I only tell you what's wrong and what's right
Only the Father knows what's wrong and what's right
Father, Son, the Holy Spirit they help give me and everyone the power to know what's wrong
and what's right and the will to accept you
Father, you and the Holy Spirit help me to help everyone to do your work
You come with the Holy Spirit to the Mother Maria in Bethlehem
Moses led the 12 Tribes out of Egypt
You helped Moses split the Red Sea
You saved the 12 Tribes
You led the 12 Tribes back to Israel
With the power of God
Help me to get the United States to a greater place
Father only you know the spirit inside me
I listen to your words
Father, you give me the power to work it out and do better
Father, I ask you for help
Every time I try, some people let me down
You get me up
You get someone to help me
Help me with the problem
Father, I ask you to help the world
To know you
To worship you
Father, give everyone to kindness
To help those who need help

Father, they help someone who hates me
Who gets me into trouble
Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble

People with Disabilities

The Medicaid helps to pay the bills for my wheelchair
For everyone's wheelchair
My Medicaid helps people who live in a group home
My Medicaid helps pay for the medicine
My Medicaid helps pay for the doctor
My Medicaid helps pay for the nurse
My Medicaid helps pay for the hospital
My Medicaid helps pay for the people who are working
My Medicaid helps pay for the people who take me to work
My Medicaid helps pay for people like me
My Medicaid helps the group home and the day program move forward.
My Medicaid is building a new group home.
The State of New York is giving everyone the Medicaid.
Medicaid gives people a place to live.
The whole nation gives money to Medicaid.
The people go out to the community to help people who need help.
Give your shirt to people who have nothing.
Give people a warm coat.
Give people pants.
We will work together to make the United States a better place to live.
The United States has to move forward to help the people.
When I came to the United States, my sister had to do paperwork to help me get the Medicaid
Without the green card, the United States doesn't let you into the United States
Without the green card, people aren't able to live here
The people who aren't able to become United States citizens.

The Light of the Whole World

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit
You are the light in my soul and the whole world
You have the power to change it
Why?
What's wrong?
You are the light to my heart
You are the light to my soul
You give me the power to fight the devil
You save me the whole world

You give me and everyone the power to follow what you say
Father, when the time comes wake up the world
Please help me help everyone
The power of wisdom
Wake me up from the dead
Jesus' mother wake me up from the dead
My head is moving all night
When the Father comes, give me the communion
Give me the oil
My mother is not home
I am home alone
The second time, I saw someone from the outside
After I saw the Devil outside my house, my voice sounds weird
When he comes, he will keep the angel fighting with devil
He took someone who listened to him
When they were still alive they were doing something kind
Keeps them open
I come to you, you heal me
You heal everyone
He wakes up to the power and the glory

The Father Comes to the Bed, Took One Person with Him

When the time comes, the star in the sky
When the time comes, the Father comes to the cloud
Comes to the bed
The Father says what did you do when you were still alive?
You did some good, you go to heaven
Sit by the angel and the communion
The angel can go anywhere
The person can go anywhere
Help the people still alive
With the power the Holy Spirit
Father I pray you will the world go
To help people still alive
Father please keep him alive
First time second time third time

The Bright Rising Morning Sun is so Pretty, the Sunrise in the Morning, the Bald Eagle in the Sky

I met you at the beach
The water is blue
The sun rises in the morning
I go out with you in the water
I go out to the water with the ship
I talk to you throughout the day
I talk about what I do
I talk about what I think
I'm thinking about you
When the night comes, I sit by the boat with you
I ask you to dinner
Two different candles light up the table
We go to see the fish
I want to see whales, sharks, sea horses, stingrays, seals, otters, crab, and squid



Lightning Horse

By The Lovely Latrice Pearson
In collaboration with Ryan Vislosky

Thank you to everyone who helps out with the project, we couldn't do it without you or any of the students.



Once upon a time, there was a girl named Moon. She lived with her mom in New York City. Moon had a hard time with her mom and teachers. They fought all the time. Moon didn't clean up her room. She was always getting kicked out of school. She was on probation for fighting. She would curse at the teachers and she didn't listen to authority. She often ran away from school and home. Her mom, Rebecca, even had to

call the police, because she couldn't find Moon.

Her mom said, "You have two options. You are going to help your grandfather, Noah, at his farm or you are going to go to a home for delinquent children who don't listen."

Moon didn't want to go to the farm, at first. But, she decided she will give it a try even though she really didn't want to go. The farm was in Texas. At home and on the

drive to the airport, Moon and her mom fought.

Moon said, "I'm going to call the authorities. This isn't right." She started complaining and yelling.

Her mom said, "This is for your own good. I don't want you to be in jail. This is your last option. If you don't go, I'm sending you to a home for children who don't listen."

Moon said, "I'll go there, but I won't like it."

She put her headphones on, so she couldn't hear her mom when she was talking to her.

They took the plane all the way to Texas and then got in a car with Moon's grandfather, Noah. He picked them up in a van. Moon's mom dropped off her off in the middle of the farm, in the middle of nowhere. Moon's mom then went back home to NYC.

Noah said, "You can have fun here, but I hope you are ready to work with the horses, because I need your help." Moon had to change her clothes, because she was wearing New York punk rock clothes. Noah gave her some overalls and cowboy boots. Then, Moon helped with the horses. She complained under her breath, because she didn't want her grandfather to hear. Noah was very strict and he told Moon when they met that she was going to be here for a few months and that she better get used to it.

Moon saw this shy, timid horse that was a little bit feisty and stand-offish. At first she didn't want to work with the horse. Moon wondered why she was there and complained underneath her breath. The horse's name was Lightning the Black Stallion.

As the weeks went by, Moon started helping to feed Lightning and giving her oats. She also cleaned her up. She grew closer to Lightning. Moon wrote stories when she was in the barn helping Lightning. Moon started writing in a journal that her

mom gave her. Lightning and Moon became close.

As Lightning and Moon became close, Noah quietly realized that he was losing money on the farm and he didn't want to admit it. That's why he was so strict. The old lady who gave Noah the farm had died and run out of money. The old lady's niece wanted to own the farm, but the grandfather wanted to keep it. They battled back and forth. The old lady's niece, Mia, called the authorities to take Moon's grandfather to court to get rights for the barn and the land. Mia wanted to subpoena Moon's grandfather. However, the judge ordered as long as Noah could afford the farm he could keep it. Embarrassed, Noah sat down with his granddaughter, Moon, and told her they were losing the farm because they didn't have enough money.

Moon was sitting in her room at night and came up with an idea. If her cousin, Tori, could help her rope and ride horses then maybe they could win some money at a rodeo. Noah was skeptical of the idea, but he eventually came around because he wanted to keep the farm. Noah also wanted Moon, when she got older, to inherit the farm.

Moon's cousin Tori started training Moon for the rodeo. They practiced doing roping, going around the barrels, and lassoing wooden bull. As the weeks went by, Moon started changing her attitude and being polite to people. She started being a little more honest, but still not that honest. She started helping around the house by doing dishes and going to the market. Moon read when she got mad and did a lot of writing in her journal too. She also played a lot with Lightning. Moon also began riding with Lightning a lot more. Moon did these things, because she wanted to. Not because she had to.

Moon started changing her life, because she knew that she could be a better

person in the long run. She thought that people would respect her more.

The local neighborhood community put on a rodeo and carnival to raise money for the farm. They did this because they really liked Noah and the farm, because Noah had all kinds of animals and helped mentor the children. Even though he was cranky at first, the neighborhood appreciated his sense of humor, his hard work, and his storytelling. The rodeo had a Ferris wheel, candy corn, merry-go-rounds, and a petting zoo. This made the old lady's niece, Mia, a little bit mad, because she wanted the farm. She was steaming inside.

Mia tried to sabotage the rodeo and carnival. She told her coworkers at her firm to boycott the rodeo and petting zoo. Mia found records on Moon and tried to sabotage all the work that Moon did to save the farm. Mia put Moon's bad record in the newspaper and online. Moon wanted to get even with Mia, but her grandfather told her not to.

"There are better ways to do that and you are trying to change your life for the better. There are better ways to handle this and you don't want to go down the wrong path again," her grandfather said.

The day of the rodeo, Mia let all the animals out of the petting zoo and called the police. She was trying to sabotage the rodeo to show that Moon and Noah were not responsible enough to keep the farm. Moon was in a store down the street getting stuff for the rodeo when this happened, and when she got back she saw all the animals outside of the petting zoo. She called all of her friends to try to bring the animals back in the petting zoo.

After they rounded up the animals, Moon walked up to Mia and said, "Why are you doing this? I'm just trying to help my grandfather. You're just trying to sabotage us and take the farm away from my family."

"My grandmother, Evalyn, lent your grandfather the farm, so they could share it. However, your grandfather didn't want to share it. Noah was supposed to pay my grandmother to use the land. However, he never did. My grandmother wanted to take Noah to court, but she died before she could. I'm just trying to get it back," Mia responded.

Moon was surprised, because Noah hadn't told them the farm was taken from anyone. Moon told Mia that she understood her now.

Noah quietly walked, with his cowboy hat pulled down over his eyes, over.

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes, you lied to me! How could you to do that to me and our family? What were you thinking?" Asked Moon.

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you the truth. I was afraid that you would not help me keep the farm. I thank you for doing this for me and our family. The truth is that I borrowed the farm from Evalyn, but I didn't mean to take the farm. I was going to give it back, but I was struggling financially and didn't know what to do. It was kind of complicated at the time and I was sad" said Noah.

"There is a way we can solve this. We don't need to fight and get the police involved. We can write up a legal document saying that you both get what half the farm makes," said Moon.

After the talk Mia and Noah went to the judge to figure out how to split the farm.

Moon wins the rodeo. Moon wins money for winning the rodeo. She shares half of that money with her grandfather and then uses the other half of her money to go to college.

Moon learns a lot from her experience. Moon starts listening to her mom, stops arguing with her mom, and they start to develop a more friendly relationship. They stop battling back and forth. She

graduates from her high school with a 4.0. She goes to college and finally starts believing that she can follow her dreams and forgets about the past and focuses on the future. She meets a friend named Jay and he slowly turns in her boyfriend. They live happily ever after. People have a past, but people can change their way of thinking if they try and are dedicated to what they are doing.

*

The reason why I wrote this story is because I want other people to know that you can change your life if you work hard and are dedicated to what you want to

achieve. If you have struggles in your life, you can always conquer them. This is why I wrote this story. So that when you read it, you can learn something. I hope you learn something from all the writers whose work gets put in the book! Don't take for granted what you have. The people who work here are great writers. They have limitations, but they learned how to adapt to their limitations. We, who wrote this book, don't let our limitations define us. We don't want you to take the little stuff for granted, like holding a cup. We all work very hard on all the stories that we wrote. I hope you think hard about what you read and that it changes your life for the better. I hope you have an open mind when you are reading these stories. Thank you.



Brielle

By Caitlin Weir
In collaboration with Maggie Perry



The phone was ringing and my heart was beating. I thought to myself, “Could this be the call?”. After five years of schooling I was getting ready to get a job. I had applied to be a Special Education Teacher.

There were two kids in my neighborhood that had disabilities. They were named Alex and Izzy. Sometimes I would stay with them while their parents went out. I would play games with them; we would play monopoly or we would watch movies. Watching them could be challenging but my mom didn’t want me to give up--she would always say that their parents needed a break. They would try to run away and they had behavior problems but I learned that I liked to help people

because of them. So, they were one of the reasons why I wanted to be a Special Education Teacher.

To become a Special Education Teacher I had to go through a lot of schooling, and over the course of my schooling I learned many things. One of the things I had to do was student teach and I really enjoyed it. I ended up student teaching at a school in the Bronx that was in a pretty bad area. I liked it but it was far away from home. There was a little girl named Briella who was a student of mine. She was adorable but she didn’t come from a good family. She was very excited about everything and I admired that about her. By the end of my student teaching she started to

trust me. I remember my last day--I wanted to cry because I would miss Briella and all my students. Briella was also one of the reasons why I wanted to be a Special Education Teacher. Sometimes I wonder about her. I wonder if she's okay. I would love to help more people like her.

The job that I applied for, and was receiving a call from, was at a school in Westchester County. That was where I grew up. My dad really wanted me to apply in Westchester County. I had to submit an application and I had to get three recommendations which I did not like. After I submitted my application, I had to wait to see if I made the next round. I was so anxious when I was waiting. But then I got the call that I was able to get an interview. I was very surprised. I had to do my interview with the principal and the head of the Special Education department. I was really nervous because they didn't know me but I felt that my education prepared me. I really wanted the job because I really wanted to work with students.

After the interview I wasn't too sure about how it went. I thought I did awful. After the questions, I had to do a mock lesson, which I hadn't really prepared for. I had to do it in front of the principal and the special education teacher. It was hard because they didn't show a lot of emotion. I couldn't tell if they understood what I was talking about, or if they were just focused on my actual teaching abilities. They didn't give a response and I had no idea what they were thinking.

But the wait was over and the phone is ringing. My heart skips a beat. I'm nervous to answer, but I know I have to pick it up.

They say, "Hello. Is this Caitlin?"
Very meekly I answer. I say, "Yes."

"We're calling about the Special Education Teacher position." There was a

long pause. I got more and more anxious. "Unfortunately, we did not accept you."

My heart dropped. I didn't know what to say. I decided to say, "Thank you" and then I hung up the phone.

Now what do I do?

I was sad, but I was also kind of relieved because I didn't know if it was meant for me. Now I had to figure out what to do next. I thought about applying to the school that I did my student teaching at. It's been over a year since I student taught there but I decided to try and apply anyways.

The application process was the same as the last one. They already knew me and they were aware that I was hard worker and able to engage the kids. They called me in for an interview right away. They were happy to see me and they seemed very happy with my interview. They told me that I had to wait for a phone call but I felt better about the overall process.

I had to wait a couple days for the phone call. It finally came and they told me that I definitely got the job. They told me that I would be teaching the same class that I student taught. I was so excited because I knew I would teach Briella.

Even though I was familiar with the school I was still nervous because it was the first day. It was the first time that I was teaching a class all by myself. But I knew that the teachers would support me. I was anxious to see all of the kids I had previously taught. I wondered how they improved and how much they would further improve this year.

When Briella came in she gave me a big hug. She couldn't believe that I was her teacher. Briella could not stop talking. I decided to have the kids do mini interviews on each other so they could get to know each other. I went over their schedule. They were taking math, social studies, english, art, music, and science. The first day went by so

fast and even though I was excited it really tiresome.

The weeks went on and I began to fit more into the schedule and patterns of teaching. As time passed, I became closer to other teachers. I noticed Briella was having a really hard time. The other teachers had told me that that Briella had gotten placed into foster care. I felt so bad and I wanted to help but I didn't know how much I could help. I really wished that I could adopt her but there was no way that I could. I thought that maybe my parents could. They talked about first fostering children with disabilities and then possibly adopting one but they never did. I decided to ask them, but I was not really sure what they would say. One of their biggest hesitations was that if they adopted her that Briella wouldn't be able to go to the school where I was teaching and I really doubted that they would want to move.

I told them about Briella and I told them how much she improved. They wanted

to meet her, but they were hesitant. I finally convinced them to come to the city and meet her. Briella was nervous and she asked me why I couldn't adopt her. That broke my heart. I told her I didn't have enough money or experience, but my parents did. I told her that I would come to visit every chance that I could.

We decided to meet at a Pizzeria because I wanted it to be fun. They fell in love with Briella (even my dad) and they knew they wanted to take a chance with her. I really wished that I could help her but I was happy that she was going to be in a good family and be in a better situation than she was now.

My parents agreed to move the Bronx so I could teach her which I really appreciated. I am excited for the rest of the year and already I can tell that Briella, and the rest of my students, are improving. I love what I do and I'm so happy that I made the choice to teach in the Bronx.



Poem

By Jeff Yarmel
In collaboration with Sarely Licon



Introduction

This year has been fun. I went to the Inspiration Project where every Thursday I come to the University of Rochester and work on my poem. I couldn't wait to come back because I do this every year. I've been writing stories about myself for the past 6 years but this year I wanted to try something new. I wanted a change from the usual story writing so I turned to a poem. Poems are fun to write. They challenge you to put your thoughts into a different rhythm of speaking. This poem is about friendship, I chose this topic because I have a lot of good friends who are there if I need an extra hand. I started the poem with a definition of what I think friendship is. Then I went and talked about specific friends who I know fit this definition of friendship. Friendship is important to me because life is great and it's nice to have people to share it with.

Jeff's poem

A friend is a person who hears what I'm saying
A friend is a person who is loving and sensitive
Someone who responds to my feelings.
They are always there for me.
We have things on our mind
We talk a lot
We work together and hang out.
I'm always there for them.

Laughter leads to happiness,
They make me happy.
Encouraging me to do the right thing,
Even when the right thing seems a little hard
They are trustworthy with secrets.

My friend Bill is a person who hears what I'm saying
My friend Bill is a person who is loving and sensitive.
One day it was really sunny,
I said, "Hey, Bill what's so funny?"
He came up behind me with some reindeer ears and put them on my head.
We all started laughing.
He took a picture of me in them.
Bill also shows me his bike.
This isn't just any bike, it's a red motorcycle.
That's my friend Bill.

My friend Josh is a person who hears what I'm saying
My friend Josh is a person who is loving and sensitive.
He showed me how to set up a game,
It's called The Simpsons-- Tapped Out.
The dad, Homer, blew up the town; and now I have to rebuild it.
But that's beside the point.
Josh and I go shopping for the room at CP.
We are always joking around,
He's a good friend.

My friend Kim is a person who hears what I'm saying.
My friend Kim is a person who is loving and sensitive.

She can hear me out,
If someone is driving me up the wall, I can tell her.
I can trust friends.
One day I gave her her work mail,
She said "Thank you, Jeff."
Kim is cool, she makes jokes.
Her jokes make me happy.

My friend Ed is a person who hears what I'm saying.
My friend Ed is a person who is loving and sensitive.
He makes jokes.
He tells me, "Jeff, don't get in my way."
But I don't care, I keep getting in his way.
He drives six of us to work, five days a week.
Always playing music, all kind and any kind.
If the bus has a problem he goes on the radio.
"2:10 to Pat the wheelchair lift doesn't go up."
And then someone comes to fix it.
He is a very funny guy.
If I'm not riding with Ed, he has to call in to Pat;
He says "Jeff is not going with me in the morning."
It's nice to have friends.
We have a lot of good times.
Make sure not to take your friends for granted.
Spend time with them.
We can lean on a friend if we are sad.
Life is hard, take advantage of the people around you.
Make memories.



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