

Stone Soup

the magazine by young writers and artists



"The Flood," by Mita Astasari, age 7, Indonesia

SNOWMEN

A couple suddenly appears out of nowhere to help Sharon's mom

THE CLOWN WHO FOUND A FROWN

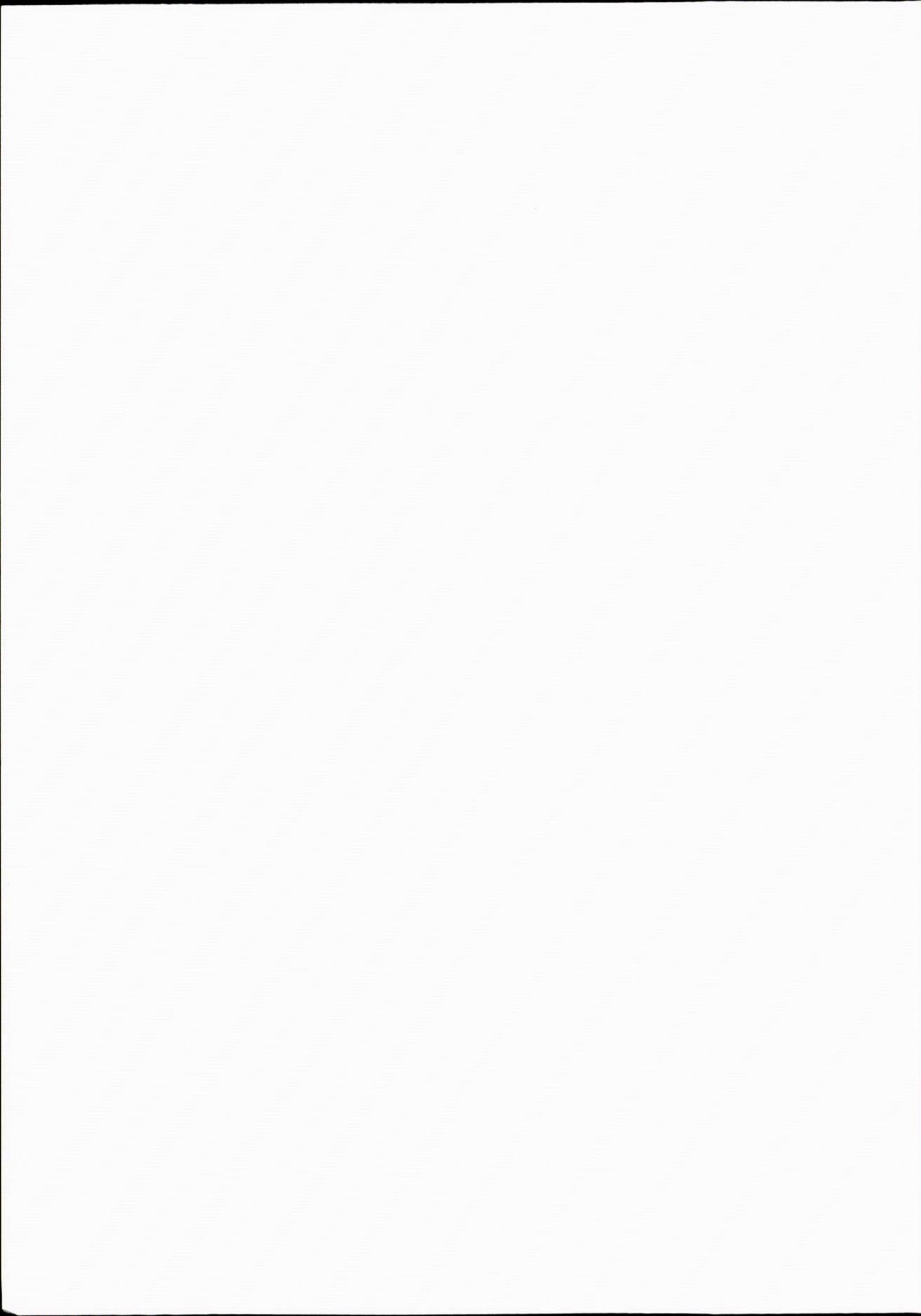
One loss takes Mikon away from the circus, another brings him back

Also: A moving new story from author/illustrator Anna Hagen
Melissa's beloved pet is a praying mantis
Edd will never forget Mr. Mercer

MARCH/APRIL 2003

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30th Anniversary
1973-2003



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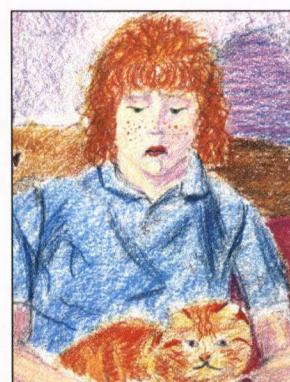
Volume 31, Number 4
March/April 2003

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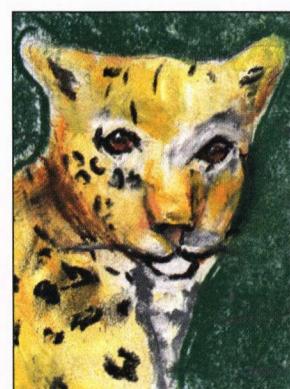
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Stone Soup

the magazine by young writers and artists

Welcome to all our readers, old and new! We've had the pleasure of publishing *Stone Soup* for 30 years.

It is our belief that, by presenting rich, heartfelt work by young people the world over, we can stir the imaginations of our readers and inspire young writers and artists to create.



Contributors' Guidelines



Stone Soup welcomes submissions from young people through age 13. Mail your work to Stone Soup, P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Include your name, age, home address and phone number.

New policy: Beginning March 1, 2003, contributors of stories and poems no longer need to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope with their submissions. After March 1, we will only respond to those submissions we are considering for possible publication. If we are considering your work, you will hear from us in four to six weeks. If you do not hear from us, it means we were not able to use your work. Don't be discouraged! Try again! If you are interested in reviewing books for *Stone Soup*, write editor Gerry Mandel for more information. Tell her a little about yourself and the kinds of books you like to read. If you would like to illustrate for *Stone Soup*, send Ms. Mandel some samples of your art work, along with a letter saying what you like to draw most. **Book reviewers and illustrators:** Please enclose a business-size self-addressed stamped envelope so we can write back to you. Here's a tip for all our contributors: Send us writing and art about the things you feel most strongly about! Whether your work is about imaginary situations or real ones, use your own experiences and observations to give your work depth and a sense of reality. (For more detailed guidelines, visit www.stonesoup.com.)



Jessie Moore, 12

Cover: "The Flood" was loaned to *Stone Soup* by The International Museum of Children's Art in Oslo, Norway. Established in 1986 by Rafael and Alla Goldin, the museum is a wonderland of floor-to-ceiling art by children from over 150 countries. Don't miss it if you are ever in Oslo! Special thanks to Angela and Alla Goldin.

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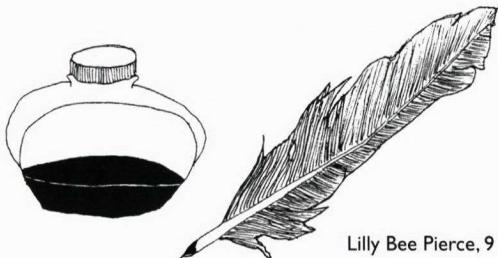
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Lilly Bee Pierce, 9

The Mailbox

I think it was 1998 when my uncle first subscribed me to *Stone Soup*. Ever since then, I have awaited getting your wonderful magazine. I read it through and through. I keep them all stacked up even if it's not organized. A few times, I have sent in my stories. Even if they don't get accepted, I smile, laugh and keep going. I've always appreciated the staff, editors and children because everyone in this magazine or who works and creates this magazine understands that sometimes kids don't get enough of what they need. You do. You whip us up a wonderful magazine, full of laughter, happiness and sadness. I love this magazine. Unfortunately, when May 1, 2003 comes around, I will be turning fourteen and unable to submit to *Stone Soup*. But I will always read this magazine with all my heart and soul. I love how each child gets a chance to express how *they* feel, not what some adult (or teacher) told them to write. They express it in their own way, whether it's through a poem they wrote or a story, or even a great book review. I want to congratulate you on what a beautiful job you've done. You've given the children of the world a chance to show everyone else, whether it's in their own country or in another, what they've got.

Rachel Simon, 13
Wayne, New Jersey

I was both surprised and excited when I saw the cover of the May/June 2002 issue. "My Village" by Maria Santay Juarez was painted in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. The painting was special to me because it would only be weeks after I received the magazine that I would be traveling to that very city. On June 16, 2002 I sat in the back of a truck, bouncing along the dusty streets of "Xela," as the local people call Quetzaltenango. And as I looked down the narrow alleyways and out into the open farms, I wondered, "Is this the same place that I saw on the cover of *Stone Soup*?" I went to Guatemala as one of a group of sixteen people from our community. The purpose of our trip was to initiate a friendship, to learn the culture of another people, and to begin our plan to help our friends in Xela build a new school. When I travel back to Quetzaltenango to help build a school in a summer or two, maybe I will meet Maria Santay Juarez, and she can show me where she painted the picture called "My Village." I can't wait!

Fiona Grugan, 11
Alexandria, Pennsylvania

I enjoyed the poem "Alone" by Brendan Grant [November/December 2002] so much! It was beautifully written. It tells the story of topics that are very sad, like racism and Muslim people and 9/11. It was breathtaking. He made the poem short yet strong. I especially liked the part: "Alone is the turban among a thousand baseball caps." Thank you so much for publishing that! It puts you in someone else's shoes to make you understand what alone means.

Megan Turley, 11
Santa Barbara, California

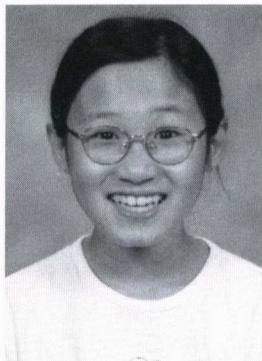
You can read and look at all the work mentioned in The Mailbox on our Web site: www.stonesoup.com.

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

Snowmen

by Sharon Wang

illustrated by Marie Nikitin



Sharon Wang, 12
Troy, Michigan



Marie Nikitin, 11
South Salem, New York

WINTER IS THE GRAIN OF SAND in an hourglass falling from one end into the other, but not at either. Winter is the dark god dressed in black coming to clasp his tight, choking hands on a blade of grass or a maple leaf. Winter, in Michigan, is snow.

And thus it snowed.

Blinding whiteness stretched as far as the eye could see. Sunlight reflected off the many facets of these crystals of ice, each snowflake like a work of art. Indeed, it seemed like a winter wonderland, the realm of every child's dreams.

I sat cross-legged next to the porch window that provided a view of the landscape around me. I had long since become used to snow such as this, but it never failed to take my breath away.

I heard my mother groan as she saw the driveway covered in two feet of snow. By now, all the roads from here to Kalamazoo would be completely submerged under the same whiteness. It would not be a fun day for driving.

She sat there quietly, the annoyance on her face suddenly turning to a mixture of regret and serenity. Her eyes looked at everything yet saw nothing, as if drifting off to a world of her own or remembering long-lost memories.

"I wonder if there are snowmen out there today," she mused.

"What?" I asked. What on earth was she talking about? Of



Indeed, it seemed like a winter wonderland, the realm of every child's dreams

course there were snowmen. All little kids built snowmen. But it was uncharacteristic of my mother to care about things like that.

"Snowmen," she replied quietly. She seemed to go into a trance. "I remember the first time I met the snowmen . . ."

I raised my eyebrows. She met snowmen? This was something that I wanted to hear. "Go on," I coaxed, interested. "You met snowmen, and then . . ." I gestured for her to continue.

It turned out that she was more than eager to tell her story. Sipping a cup of hot chocolate, she began.

"It was a winter just like this one. As far as the eye could see, there was only snow. Miles and miles of endless whiteness that engulfed everything. The traffic on the roads was so terrible that it practically drove me nuts. Back then, your father went on business trips often. One day, a phone call came from the airport. It was your father calling for me to pick him up.

"There had been a blizzard, and everyone had been locked up in their houses for practically a week. Since then, it had been snowing continuously. Though the snow-plowers worked twenty-four hours a day, the road conditions were far from good. The worst part was that I could not see clearly. The wind howled and brought whirling snowflakes onto the windshield, hitting the glass at fifty miles an hour. Though I knew that there were a couple of cars in front and behind me, it was as if I was separated from them and in my

own little realm of nightmares.

"Suddenly, the car stopped moving. The engine was still wheezing, but the vehicle just would not budge. It had just gotten stuck on a slope, wheels unable to move through two feet of snow. I felt a terrible frustration well up inside of me. I had to get to the airport soon! How was I supposed to do that when I couldn't even drive?

"I heard a sound. Looking, I saw someone knocking on my window. It was a couple dressed in heavy overcoats and wrapped in scarves. They had obviously been out in the snow for a long time, for they were covered in white. Moving clumsily due to their heavy clothing, they truly seemed to be snowmen.

"The woman who had knocked smiled warmly. Her husband, a middle-aged man with black-framed glasses, asked if I needed help. I nodded fervently.

"The two went to the rear of the car and began to push with all their might. Despite the harsh weather, they did not pause. In a matter of minutes, my car was functioning again. I wanted to thank them, but they were nowhere to be seen.

"Remembering your father waiting for me at the airport, I rushed to the center of the city. Once there, I excitedly blurted the whole story to him. I also expressed the fact that I was eternally grateful, but that I regretted not being able to tell them thanks. When he heard this, he smiled. 'I know exactly

how to thank them,' he said.

"The next Saturday, we walked up to a snowy mountain slope through which a single narrow road winded. It was freezing cold, but the warmth in our hearts was enough to keep us sustained for a lifetime.

"By and by, a car drove by and got stuck in the snow. I knocked on the window and asked the woman inside if she needed help. She nodded. We went to the back of the car and pushed her out of snow.

"Once she had left, I turned excitedly to your father. 'She was one of the snowmen,' I told him, proud of my discovery.

"He looked skeptical. 'How would you know that?' he asked.

"Because of her warm smile,' I replied. Seeing that there was another car that needed help, he did not reply.

"He had glasses; he was a snowman too!' he exclaimed, teasing. I did not find it a bit funny.

"That day, we helped many people get across the rough path so they could go to where others needed them. And I knew that this was the best way of all I

could repay the snowmen that rescued me." My mother stopped talking, the story having ended.

An hour had gone by since she started, and the main roads were miraculously cleared of snow.

"Did you ever find the original snowmen?" I asked, curious.

"No, but they're still somewhere out there, having brought spring to people on a bleak winter day."

I paused, wondering. This story was almost too wonderful, like a fairy tale. I propped my hands under my chin and stared out the window wistfully. "I wonder if there are still snowmen now . . ."

My mother smiled, her attention drawn to something outside the window. "I'm sure there are," she said, a mysterious tone to her voice.

Following her gaze, I saw a red minivan stuck in the small road inside our subdivision. Suddenly, I understood what she meant. Grabbing a coat, I rushed outside. My mother followed.

I knocked on the window to ask them if they needed help. Inside were a smiling woman and a man with black-framed glasses.

❖

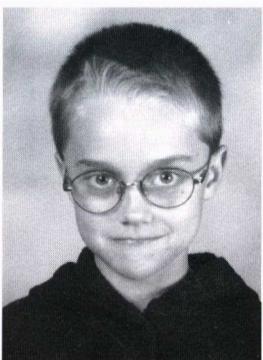
No Mercy

by Jag Michael Stephens

illustrated by Noel Lunceford



Jag Michael Stephens, 10
Utica, Kentucky



Noel Lunceford, 9
Grandview, Missouri

JN SCHOOL, KIDS ARE ALWAYS hearing horror stories about teachers, principals, custodians, and lunch ladies, but what about bus drivers? Back in 1999 Edd Phoenix lived three days he would never forget.

School had only been in session two months when Edd's regular bus driver, Mr. Huffler, announced one Monday afternoon that he would be out of town the next three days.

"Who is the sub?" Manty Totem, a friend of Edd's, blurted.

"I believe it will be Mr. Mercer," remarked Mr. Huffler.

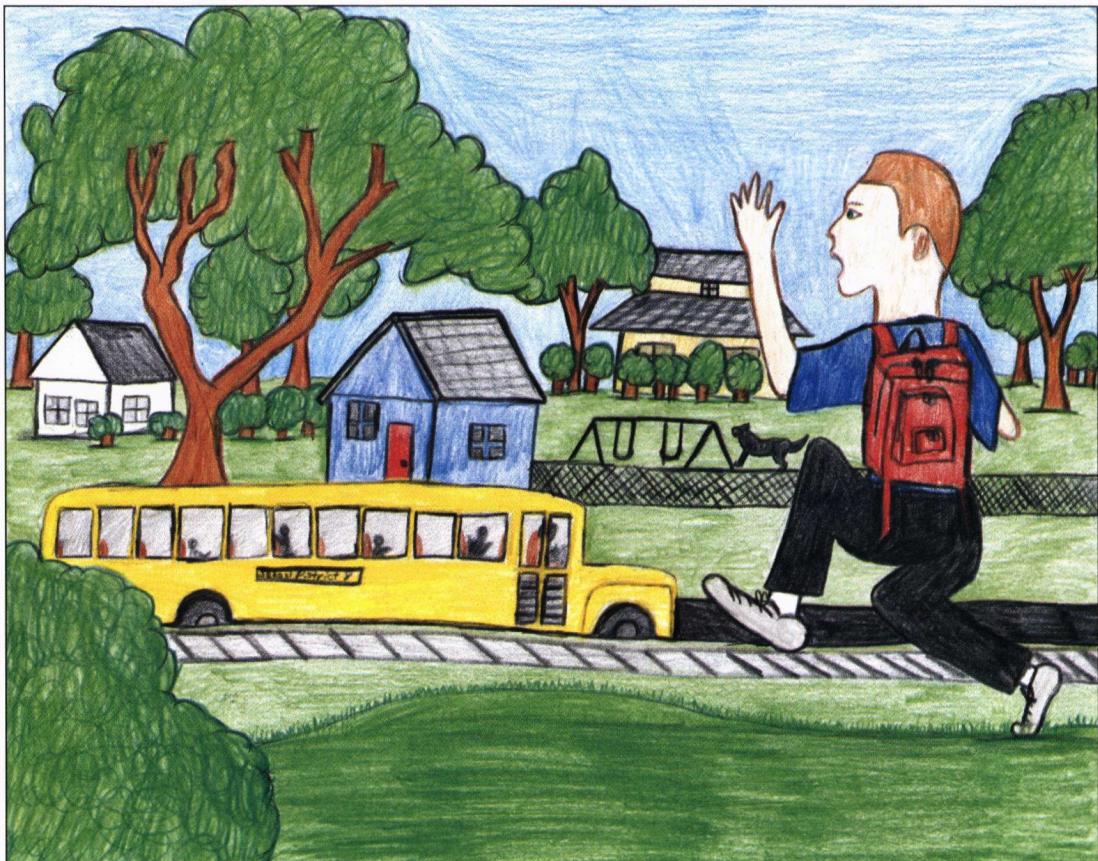
The children gasped, their mouths as wide as moon craters, their eyes as big as oranges. "Oh, no! Not No Mercy Mercer!" they shouted.

"I know you have heard dreadful rumors about Mr. Mercer, but you can't always believe what you hear," said Mr. Huffler. "He's actually a very pleasant man. Just remember: be on your best behavior."

Tuesday morning, as Edd crawled out of his water bed, his first thought was, Is No Mercy Mercer really as mean as they say? While Edd showered, dressed, and ate breakfast, *No Mercy Mercer* kept flashing on and off like a lightbulb in his mind.

On his way out the door to catch the bus, his mom reminded Edd, "Did you feed Friskus?"

Immediately, he dropped his backpack by the front door, dashed to the garage, and scooped Friskus a bowl of Kitty



The bus was already waiting at the end of the street

Chow. Then Edd sprinted toward the bus stop.

The bus was already waiting at the end of the street. Behind the wheel sat a man who resembled an army sergeant. You could tell by his bulging biceps that he lifted weights. His gray hair was buzzed all the way down to the scalp. Instead of a uniform, he wore a sleeveless muscle shirt and blue jeans. Covering his eyes was a pair of aviator sunglasses, like the ones Tom Cruise wore in the movie *Top Gun*. Mr. Mercer was large and in charge.

As the doors to the bus opened, No Mercy Mercer looked him square in the eye and growled, "About time, son. Don't keep me waiting tomorrow."

After being lectured for the ten-second delay, Edd quickly sat down next to Manty, who was tightly grasping a Hot Wheels car in his right hand. "Manty, don't get any wise ideas. I think we just need to lay low."

"He'll never know who threw it," snickered Manty.

Just as the bus was coming to a stop in front of the school, another boy en-

couraged Manty to throw the car.

"Yeah, I think I should too," Manty chuckled. "That will make that scrawny old No Mercy Mercer regret the day he ever subbed on this bus."

Manty swiveled around in his seat to grin at Edd. Edd was staring upward.

"He's behind me, isn't he?" murmured Manty.

"Yep. He sure is," Edd whispered.

Manty spun in the direction of the six-foot bus driver to find that Edd wasn't joking.

Taking the metal car out of Manty's hand, Mr. Mercer said, "Not a good idea, son. If I have any more trouble out of you, you'll be visiting the principal's office."

Manty looked like he wanted to dig a burrow and hide. Edd could see that Manty's heart was almost pounding out of his chest. His heart was running like a generator. Even though Mr. Mercer wasn't talking to Edd, he was still scared stiff and shaking like a leaf.

Finally they reached school. Edd was never happier to enter a school building in his entire life. All day long all he could think of was boarding the bus of doom that afternoon. Of course, the school day went by quicker than a blink of an eye.

Ring, ring, ring—there was the horrible sound of the bell, telling him it was time to venture to the bus and No Mercy Mercer.

"After this morning's incident, this is a no-talk afternoon!" the sub demanded loudly. All of the children were petrified

and quiet as mice. Edd decided that for the next two days he would be sick.

The next morning Edd's mom went into his bedroom to wake him up. He rolled over and whimpered, "I don't feel so good."

She walked over to his bed and felt his forehead. "Well, honey, you don't feel hot, but let's take your temperature to be safe," she said. When the thermometer read 98.6 degrees, she urged, "You don't have a fever. What's wrong? Has something happened at school?"

Hesitating a few seconds, Edd answered, "No."

"Edd, I know when something's wrong. Usually you can't wait to go to school," said his mom. "What happened?"

"It's our totally horrible bus driver!" he admitted.

"Mr Huffler? You love Mr. Huffler!" Edd's mom exclaimed.

"No, not Mr. Huffler," said Edd, "the substitute for the next couple of days!"

Edd's mom bent over and listened to his story. Then she replied, "Edd, you need to go to school. You're not sick. He's probably not as bad as you say. You just need to get to know him. Remember, you can't always judge a book by its cover."

Reluctantly, Edd crawled out of bed and dressed, dreading to face a duplicate of the previous day. He rushed eating his sausage and biscuit, and left ten minutes early.

When the bus doors opened, Mr. Mercer commented, "Thanks for being

on time today, son." Edd nodded, then searched for a seat. Noticing that Manty had a grin plastered from ear to ear, Edd chose an empty seat. Whatever Manty was up to, he didn't want any part of it.

Five minutes down the road, Manty was standing in his seat. Edd dropped his head and sputtered, "When is he ever going to learn?"

No Mercy Mercer stared into the visor mirror and ordered Manty to sit back down. Manty obeyed, but just as the bus was merging back into traffic, Manty changed over to Edd's seat. Edd shook his head and moaned, "Why me?"

SCREEECH!!! The bus came to a halt. No Mercy Mercer roared, "That's it, boy. I had trouble out of you yesterday, and twice today, but I won't tomorrow. You're going to the principal's office!"

By the last morning, there was no doubt who was in charge. Everyone heard that Manty's trip to the principal's office got him expelled for a day. No one whispered a word or moved a muscle the entire trip to school. That afternoon his mother was picking him up for a dentist appointment. Edd was lucky. He would never have to suffer the pain of No Mercy Mercer again.

That following Saturday, Edd was in the park practicing baseball with his team. Since it was a beautiful spring day with the temperature in the seventies, the park was overflowing with people.

While Edd waited for fly balls in the outfield, he caught a peek of a man who seemed awfully familiar. He had on a sleeveless muscle shirt and blue jeans,

his hair was buzzed down to the scalp, and he wore a pair of aviator sunglasses, but he was sitting in the sandbox, playing with a two-year-old. Is that . . . ? No, it couldn't be! Edd reasoned and continued with practice.

When practice ended, Edd strolled over to get a closer look. There were sand castles everywhere, and a couple of younger kids had joined the fun, all laughing and having a grand time.

About that time the man looked up to see Edd frozen beside the sandbox. "Hi, young man. Don't you ride the bus I just subbed for?"

"Y-yes," Edd stammered.

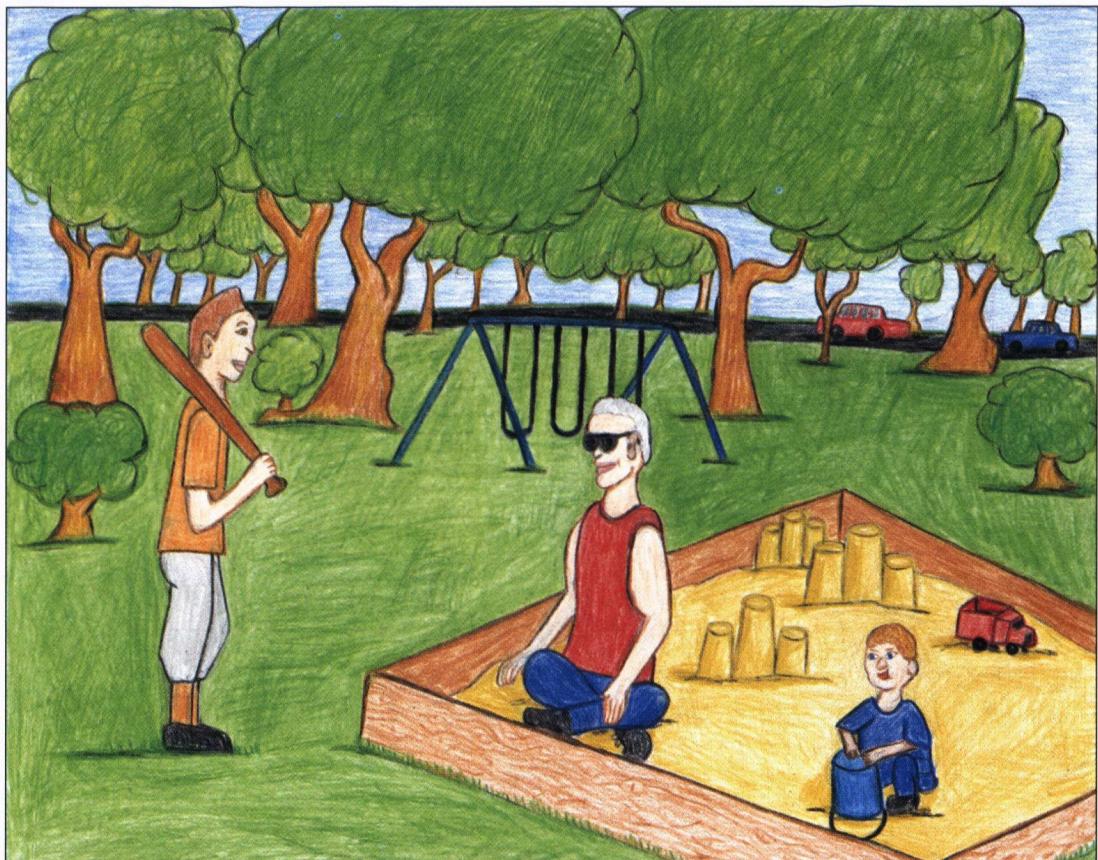
"What brings you to the park on this lovely spring day?" Mr. Mercer asked.

Edd thought, I think I've finally gone crazy. This guy looks like No Mercy Mercer, but he sure doesn't act like him.

While Edd was lost in thought, Mr. Mercer continued, "Saturday is the day I spend with my grandson, Timmy. Since the weather is so agreeable, we're doing what we love best: playing in the sand. My little Timmy is the sand castle king!" Timmy wrapped his arms around his grandfather's neck and gave him a gigantic SMOOCH, right square on the cheek.

"No M-M-Mer-, I mean, Mr. Mercer, you're acting so different away from the bus," said Edd.

"Oh, you know how kids are always trying to take advantage of substitutes. Once I retired from my regular bus route and started subbing, I realized that the only way I could gain respect was to



Mr. Mercer grinned. "Promise that you'll keep my secret?"

have some rumors floating around. Do you think I got my bluff in?"

"I guarantee you have!" Edd confirmed.

Mr. Mercer grinned. "Promise that you'll keep my secret?"

Edd nodded in agreement and headed on home.

The following year, Mr. Mercer was

their regular bus driver. Mr. Huffler had retired, and No Mercy Mercer had come out of retirement. Standing large and in charge, he provided everyone with his rules, sat down, and gave Edd a quick wink in the visor mirror.

Now, whenever Edd meets someone new, he wonders what they're really like. He'll never forget Mr. Mercer. ♦

Asleep At Last

by Travis Wilkins-Smith

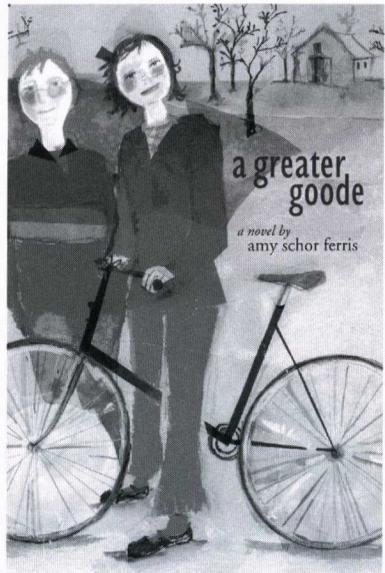


Travis Wilkins-Smith, 12
Dorchester, Massachusetts

Nails piercing my brain
Glass shattering around me
Metal crunching, smashing together
Crying all around me
Screeching, Screaming
Howling, Wailing, Weeping
It seems like a hundred years have passed
Just when you are about to blow a gasket
The baby falls asleep
We shut off the phone
Take off our shoes
We talk in sign language

Book Review

by Martina McLarty



Martina McLarty, 12
El Cerrito, California

A Greater Goode by Amy Schor Ferris; Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 2002; \$15



AUTHOR AMY SCHOR FERRIS's latest story, *A Greater Goode*, is a touching novel about Addie Goode, a twelve-year-old, and her experience of friendships and the role that those friendships play in her growing up. The story is written from Addie's point of view, and she tells about her own experiences, throwing in her own thoughts as she goes along. It is well written with good plots throughout the story and, indeed, is a page-turner. As soon as I opened the book to the prologue and read the first sentence, I was a captive of the book, entrapped in its pages with my eyes glued to the words.

I remember it was a Monday, when I started the book. It was in Dr. McDonald's office. That day I was going to have maxillofacial surgery and I was reading *The Vile Village* by Lemony Snicket. I was at an awfully boring part, so I got *A Greater Goode* out of my bag and started reading. When the assistant called my name, I got up with the book in my face, and when we were in the operating room, she said, "Let me take your book, I don't think you'll be having time to read."

I screamed, "No no no no no no no no no no!!!!!!!"

At home Mom said, "Dinner's ready." I was so involved in the book that I barely even heard her so I didn't say anything.

"Dinner's ready!" I ignored her.

"Let's eat. Dinner's ready!!!!"

"Just a minute . . ." I muttered without looking up.

It was like that for a while until Mom threatened to take the book away and I finally agreed to eat.

At night I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep without finding out how the book ended, so I read and read until I closed the book and was satisfied.

Just like Addie, I have had one of those weekends where everything is happening in "one full swoop," as her housekeeper Jessie would say. Whether it's that you have a piano concert, your best friend is moving away, a major history report is due, and you need to get a new bathing suit, or something that's a lot more complicated like, in Addie's case, I've always had a good friend to help me get through it all.

But I have never really had a best friend for long because a lot of my friends tend to move away. At the moment, I'm the type of kid where I'm friends with everyone, not real good friends, just friends, and a lot of people think that's great, but I wish that I had a best friend that I could tell everything to like Addie and her best friend Luke.

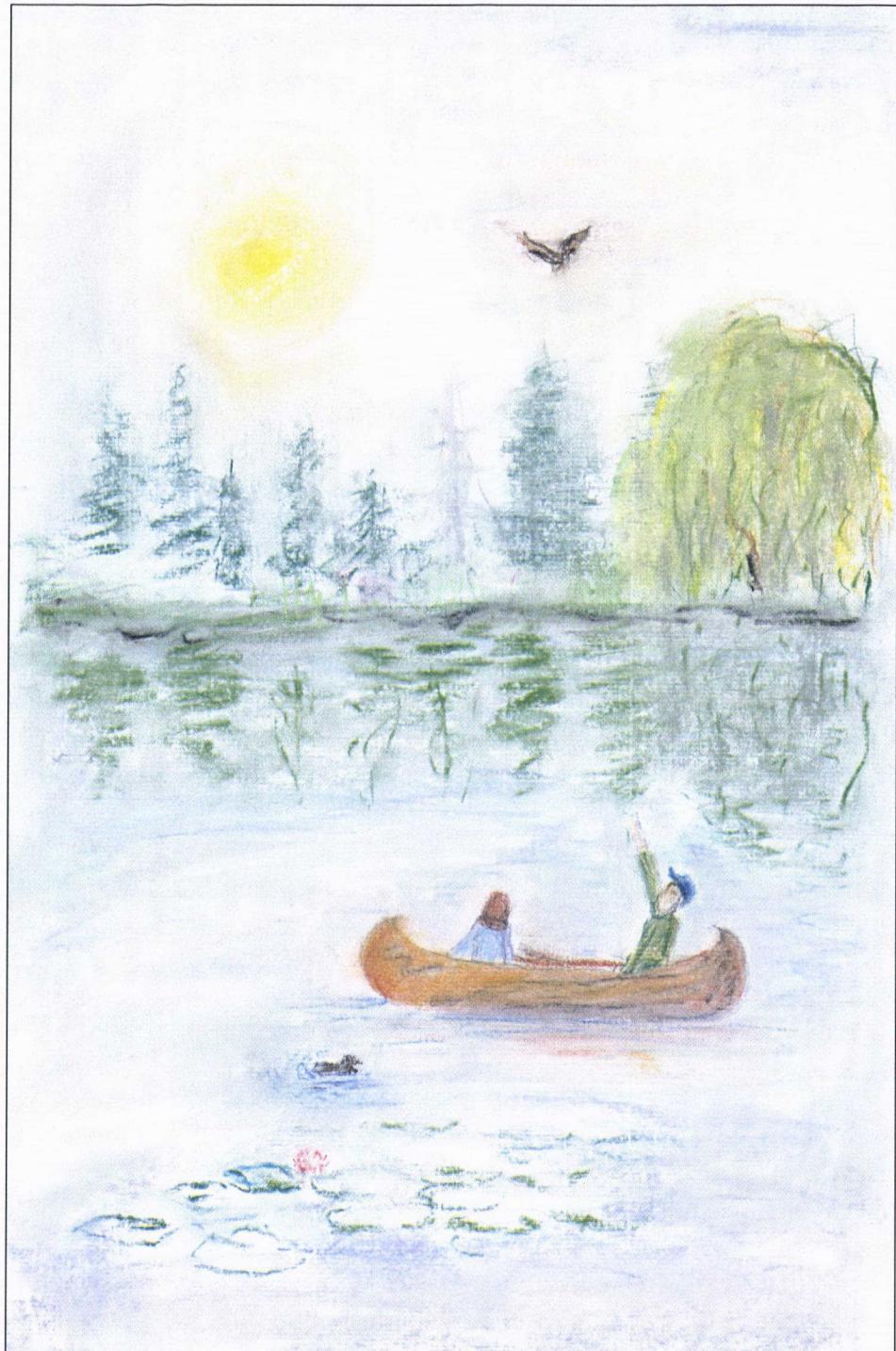
When Addie and Luke saw the creepy guy being hateful toward Rachel and

then slapping her in the old abandoned church, Addie and Luke ran away. But when Addie asked Jessie what she would do if she saw something bad happening, she replied, "If I saw something bad happening, I'm not the type to turn my back. If I saw someone being hateful, I'd put my two cents in. I think sometimes walking away from evil is just as evil."

Walking away from evil is just as evil. This is the one phrase in the entire book that inspired me most. Unlike Addie, I'm not the type that can stand up to people that easily and I am the type to just walk away from things.

After hearing what Jessie said, I was glad that Addie decided to do something about what she saw. Judging by other experiences that she lived through, I can tell that Addie is a very kind and courageous person who can easily stand up for herself and others. At the same time that I was glad, I was also jealous of her and the ability she had to speak her mind. I would like for Addie to be my friend and have her teach me how to overcome my fears and be like her.

I recommend this engaging novel for anyone who has been through tough times and knows that life brings lots of hard and complicated situations. If you're looking for a good book on friendship, this is the book for you. *A Greater Goode* is a story that touches the heart, reminding us all that life is not perfect, and, nevertheless, friends will always be there for you when you need them. ♦



"Look," my dad whispered

Canoeing

by Heather Goff

illustrated by Ksenia Vlasov

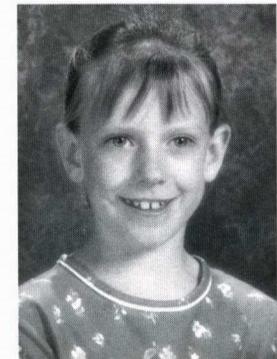
JT WAS EARLY in the morning with a nip in the air when my dad and I went canoeing. We were on Boot Lake at Half Moon Trail Resort, going canoeing to see the beaver and any other morning animals.

When we were walking down to the canoe everything was calm. I felt peaceful. Fog was rising off the lake, some birds chirped, and everything was still. It was very pretty out.

We got to the lake and pushed the canoe into the water. Then we climbed in. We sat for a moment. Then my dad whispered, "Paddle silently." It felt as silent as a classroom during a test. I watched the calm water turn into ripples as I pushed it away with my paddle. I still felt calm and relaxed gliding over to the beaver dam. "Look," my dad whispered. I looked up in the sky. Spiraling over the trees was a hawk searching for something to eat. Then a loon called out, breaking the silence. The loon was a few feet away.

All of a sudden the canoe slowed to a stop. I looked over at the shore. There was a pile of sticks. "The dam," I exclaimed. My dad held a finger to his lips and pointed to the water. A beaver was swimming toward the dam. I held my breath and watched. SLAP! The beaver suddenly slapped his tail, warning us. Then it sped off into the dam.

I let out my breath slowly, feeling safe and calm. The sun was starting to peek over the horizon when under my breath I said, "Wow."



Heather Goff, 9
Eagan, Minnesota



Ksenia Vlasov, 11
Katonah, New York

A Sour Note

by Jennifer A. Barr

illustrated by Elizabeth Wright

PART ONE: A SOUR NOTE



HE AIR WAS HOT and still, like a warm fuzzy blanket that dulled the senses, making everyone pleasantly sleepy. Even bees veered off their straight course and hummed in lazy loops. The air was thick with pollen; but that was not why Sandy sniffled. She ran up her apartment steps by twos up to the fourth floor. She slammed against her door, sobbing, and grabbed her key out of her black backpack. She fumbled in the lock, her eyes blurry. Sandy burst into her house, throwing her backpack onto the ground. Tears coursed down her cheeks in an ever-steady torrent of water. Running into her room, she created eddies of swirling dust. She was sobbing, trying to catch her breath through her clogged nose. Coughing and hacking, Sandy hurled herself upon the bed.

“Why?! Why?! Why?!”

With each “why” the sadness crescendoed to anger.

Turning over onto her back, she winced as the ponytail holder dug into her head. Yelling her fury, she ripped the holder out of her short red hair and fell back again on her green comforter. Her breathing slowed. She sniffed, but was calmer now.

In a small voice she again asked herself, “Why?”

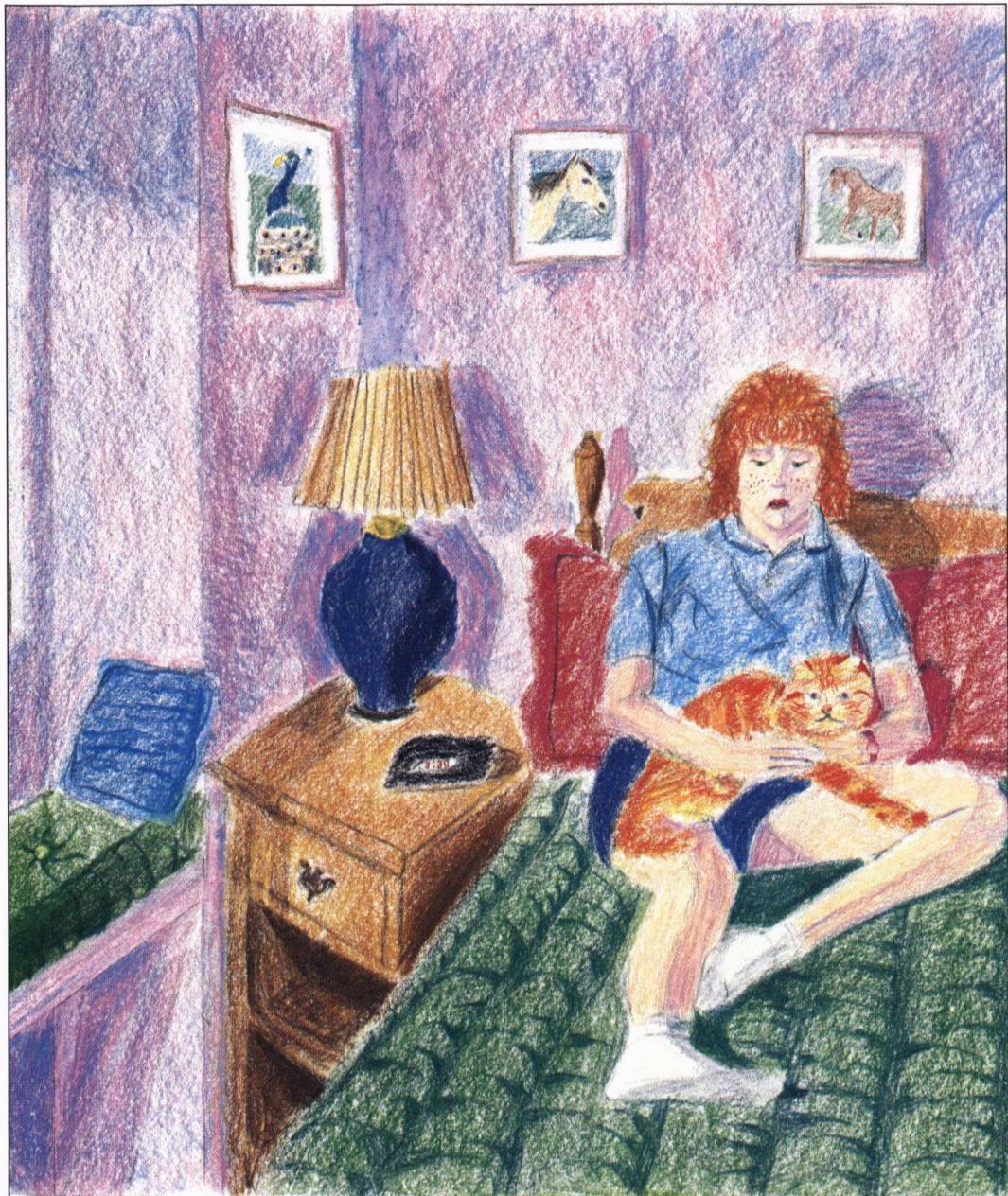
Her orange tabby, Fireball, uncurled, stretched, and showed his teeth in a large yawn. He walked onto Sandy, purring sentiments.



Jennifer A. Barr, 13
Poway, California



Elizabeth Wright, 12
Las Vegas, Nevada



"I didn't do it, Fireball. Why would he say that I did it?"

"Oof," Sandy grunted weakly. She raised up a hand and started stroking the furry friend. Purring contentedly, he padded in a few circles and settled down on her stomach. He always knows

when I need comfort the most, Sandy thought fuzzily. Maybe it's instinct.

Talking to her cat, Sandy sighed, "I didn't do it, Fireball. Why would he say that I did it? I barely even know Colin.

I would have never done that to *anything*, much less the band instruments. Mr. Foley knows how much I love the band. Doesn't he?" Her eyes moistened slightly.

Memories of what she had seen flipped through her head like a slide show. A broken window, the glass shards askew. Trombones bent in half with their bells crumpled. Cases everywhere, open with instruments spilling out like so many marbles. Tubas with dents the size of saucers in their delicate brass: ruined, out of commission. Mr. Foley's face as he looked at the accused. In that look Sandy remembered sadness and anger, but most of all, disappointment.

Sandy's pale face sported freckles and scared green eyes that glistened with tears. Those eyes widened in a sudden realization. "And they're going to make Mom pay! She can't afford it! She can't even afford a car much less so many instruments!" Her eyes looked downward. Almost instinctively, she petted Fireball with ferocity. "We can't afford it." Sandy jumped up with resolution in her eyes, shoving the cat off. "And gosh darn it! We're not going to have to try and afford it! I'm going to prove my innocence! I have three days to prove my innocence and by all that's good and holy I'll do it if it's the last thing I do!"

Sandy strode over to her computer. Fireball crossly flicked an ear at Sandy, then loped over to a window seat. He jumped up and settled in the cushions. Unnoticing, Sandy flumped down in

her computer chair and pressed a button. The screen began to glow, beep, click and whir. Sandy glared at the computer impatiently; if it made any more noises it would moo. She swirled around in her chair so she faced her cat, who washed himself contentedly.

Sandy started explaining her ideas and thoughts to her cat. The words came out, bubbling over like an eager spring. "Mom will be back in five days, and it'll take, hmm, about three days for the suspension papers to process through. So I have only three days to prove my innocence. Less, actually. About two days. I have to prove my innocence! It's my only hope! I need a list of suspects: people in the band who don't play tuba, baritone sax, French horn, trombones, or tenor sax, considering those were the instruments that were destroyed." Her brows knit furiously. "What happened that night? Lessee. PTA meeting at the MPR. Nope, too early. When Mr. Foley announced the incident he said it would have been between ten PM and five AM, when the janitors weren't there." She gnawed her lip. Then her eyes widened. "The football game at the high school! Duh! She slapped her forehead. Hearing the first couple of notes of the *Jaws* theme song, she spun her chair around. Grabbing the mouse, she guided her shark cursor over the *Jaws* desktop to the Word icon. She double-clicked with familiar ease. The computer chugged and clicked as it opened the word-processing program. (She knew almost everyone in the band.

That gave her the knowledge needed to make a decent suspect list.) Being a percussionist also gave her a pretty good view of the classroom and anyone who was yelled or glared at, since she was in the back. Sandy started typing the names of the band members who had older brothers or sisters in the high school. As a second thought Sandy typed the names of those people's friends who may have gone with them. By the time the document was ready to be printed she had about twenty kids' names typed in front of her eyes. Clicking the print button, Sandy noticed the time: 9:45—time to get ready for bed.

PART TWO: TUNING THE NOTE

IT WAS YET another beautiful summer day as Sandy trudged up her apartment steps. She flipped open her mailbox and took out the letter inside. Junk. She sighed and let one shoulder of her backpack slide off. With a little twist, Sandy swung the backpack to her front and opened the smaller pocket. She wiggled her hand in it, feeling for her key. Triumphant, she held up the silver key and stuck it in the lock. She bit her lip and mumbled to herself, "Right, left, right, turn and push." The door swung open. Sandy walked down the hallway to her room. Fireball followed her in and looked up expectantly. Sandy smiled and scratched his head. Walking by her desk and grabbing the printout she had made last night, she wrestled her algebra textbook and a pen out of

her backpack. She layered the paper on top of the book as a hard writing surface. Sandy slumped down in her big comfy armchair and Fireball jumped onto her lap. Awkwardly, Sandy raised the book and paper above her cat. Sandy frowned as she looked at the list.

Corey	Anna	Kevin
Colin	Rory	Joshua
Andrew	Hanna	Walter
Shelby	Jessica	Ryan
Sarah	Matthew	Bryan
Katie	Todd	Ashley
Melissa	Kyle	

"Lessee. How could I narrow it down?" Sandy looked at her friend. "Do you have any ideas? I.M.! That's it!" She pressed a button on her computer, got up, and started pacing.

"Everyone in my whole class is connected to AOL Instant Messenger! I'll just log on with my screen name that I don't use: Drumstik99." Fireball yawned. "Yes, I know it's boring. That's why I don't use it. Anyway, when I log on I'll ask who went to the game. I know who has what screen name." Sandy looked at her watch. "Busy hour is just about to start." She chewed her lip impatiently. And with a fluidity gained from practice, she logged on to Messenger and hunted for names she knew. "Aha!" she cried as she spotted a familiar name on her Buddy List.

Unconsciously, she murmured aloud what she typed. "Hey calvin&hobbes! Did you go to the football game at the high school on Monday?"

She chewed her lip impatiently until the digital answer jerked across the screen. Sandy read it under her breath. "Hi. Yeah. I had invited Rory and my girlfriend Katie but they couldn't come."

Sandy crossed those people out on her list, then typed another question. "Do you know who else went?"

She read aloud his answer, "Kyle went. I think Shelby went too. No, she had a doctor's appointment."

Bye, Shelby, Sandy thought.

"That's all I can help you with. Sorry." He paused in his typing. "Who are you anyway?" Typing quickly, Sandy thanked him and said goodbye. Immediately, she logged off Instant Messenger.

Sandy unconsciously swayed from side to side in her chair. "Who has motivation? Ryan plays clarinet. He's a nice enough guy, but I can't cross him off the list for being nice. He has gotten yelled at for forgetting a mouthpiece. Andrew's just an all-around jerk. He gets everyone mad at him, including all his teachers. But he seems pretty laid back. I doubt he'd do it; he has more of an I-don't-care attitude rather than a malicious one." She put a small X by his name, showing that it wasn't likely. "He doesn't even care about his grade. Matthew could have done it. Mr. Foley yells at him, like, twenty times a day. Matthew would be really mad at Mr. Foley. Todd, no," Sandy shook her head and smiled wryly as she crossed him off. "He's so meek and spineless, he would-

n't even hurt a fly. Kevin's pretty weird. He's a special-ed kid, not for any particular mental problems, he just has anger problems. He's kind of ticked at Mr. Foley for not getting into advanced band. I'll keep him on, just in case, but I kind of doubt he'd do it. Bryan is probably a really good candidate. He already has a criminal record. And I heard he's gotten stoned before." Fireball blinked at her. "It could happen!" She silently ran through the rest of the list in her mind. "Brian, Kevin, and Matthew seem like the only suspects that would work. I'll hack into their e-mail. But I'll do that later. First I'll break into Colin's. He was the jerk who pinned it on me. Good thing his e-mail is on Hotmail.com or I'd never get in." Riana hadn't told her how to hack into Yahoo! e-mail addresses yet. Sandy let her mind wander briefly. Riana was a tenor sax, which was one of the instruments destroyed. She refused to talk to Sandy after Sandy had been the one accused. Riana had been her best friend, Sandy thought, her eyes slightly bleary; would they ever talk to each other again?

Sandy waited impatiently, drumming her fingers on the desk, as the dial-up connection revved up.

SANDY LOOKED at Colin's inbox. He had some unopened junk mail, a webring newsletter, and a reply e-mail from his friend called "Re: Guilty." It sounded possibly helpful. She opened and read a short heartfelt message from the friend.



Sandy happily drummed on any random thing that stayed still for thirty seconds

That bites, man.

Sandy rolled her eyes. That was worth clogging the guy's inbox for. Sandy scrolled down and read the original message.

To: kungfufighter680@msn.com

From: hobo@hotmail.com

Subject: guilty

This guy caught me drinking on the way home from a football game. He had smashed through the window in the

band room and was trashing all the instruments there. He was yelling so loud like he was nuts or something. He was yelling something like, "I'm not a wimp! I'm not spineless!" He told me that if I didn't say that this girl in my class did it he'd tell my parents I was drinking. I don't want to get in trouble, so I did it. I'm feeling kinda cruddy about it.

Colin

Grimly, she printed the e-mail out.

"It sounds like Todd, but I'm not sure. I feel so bad. We've all generally ignored him, and assumed it was cool, but it must hurt him real bad inside. I'll talk to him tomorrow, we'll get this fixed."

PART THREE: ON A HAPPY NOTE

THE SUN'S RAYS shone pleasantly warm on Sandy's glowing face. She swaggered casually down the street, the keychains on her backpack tinkling. Sandy had her pair of favorite sunglasses on her eyes; underneath, her eyes twinkled. Sandy had pulled out her drumsticks and happily drummed on fence-posts, ceramic pots and statues, and any other random thing that stayed still for thirty seconds. She hopped up her apartment steps using both feet; pausing at each step to drum merrily on the railing. Sandy skipped to her door and opened it.

She ran into her room and shouted "Wahooooooooooooo!!!!!!" Fireball, who had been asleep on Sandy's bed, yawned and stood up. He stretched and looked up, blinking at Sandy. Sandy smiled back radiantly.

"Colin told Mr. Foley who did it," Sandy shouted exuberantly. Fireball meowed as Sandy sat down on the floor, her legs outstretched.

"Todd was the one who really did it." Sandy frowned. "He really isn't spineless, and he should get all the more respect for that. The Assistant Principal, Colin, Todd, the counselor, Mr. Foley and I all had a meeting. The entire story came out, including Colin's problem.

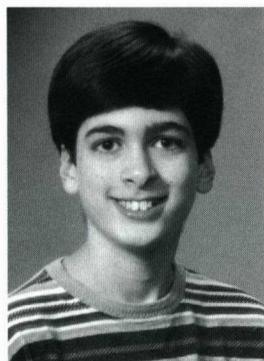
Poor Colin," Sandy sighed. "His parents are divorced, and he has such a hard time. And poor Todd, whom we all ignore. Colin is in a rehabilitation clinic, and his parents are very angry at him. I feel a little guilty, but it had to be done, right?" Her eyebrows knitted together in a frown. "I'm going to be really nice to Todd from now on, and Colin. I'll see if I can let them in my circle. It's the least I can do." Sandy lay back on her bed. "You know, Fireball, in real life there is not just black and white. Everything is just varying shades of gray, not one particular one being good or wrong." Sandy lightened up, smiling dryly. "Of course, when the Assistant Principal finds out I hacked into Colin's e-mail, and she tells my mom, I'll probably have the computer taken out of my room."

Sandy looked up at her ceiling. As one famous guy said, whose name Sandy forgot, "Once the mind is stretched, it can never go back to its original size." (Something like that.) Sandy's mind had stretched greatly, and even though she may try and shut out the new feeling of empathy, she could never return to the innocence of thinking everything and everyone was as they seemed.

Fireball purred, interrupting her thoughts, and looked up at Sandy, closing one eye in a wink. And though she had seen him do that a hundred times before, this time seemed just a little more special; like he knew all along that everything would turn out all right. ♦

Alone

by Matthew McDaniel



Matthew McDaniel, 13
Loudon, Tennessee

Will a friend float here
among the waves that swell, and flow,
and break upon the rocks
like music for the soul?

Will a friend swim here
among the whales that jump, and dive,
and hide down in the depths
like love within a heart?

Will a friend fly here
among the gulls that wheel, and cry,
and use what they can find
like children in summer?

Will a friend walk here
among the crabs that race, and run,
and fight for tiny caves
like men finding new realms?

Or will I sit here,
among the winds that swirl, and blow,
and sprinkle sand on me
like snow on a cold day, . . .
alone?

Sable

by Anna Hagen

illustrated by the author



Anna Hagen, 12
Lake Oswego, Oregon

THE FULL MOON SHONE LAZILY through the drifting night clouds, casting barely any light on the boarded warehouses slumping along the empty streets. Through the dank alleys, an ebony shadow slipped unperturbed, defining the true meaning of discreet.

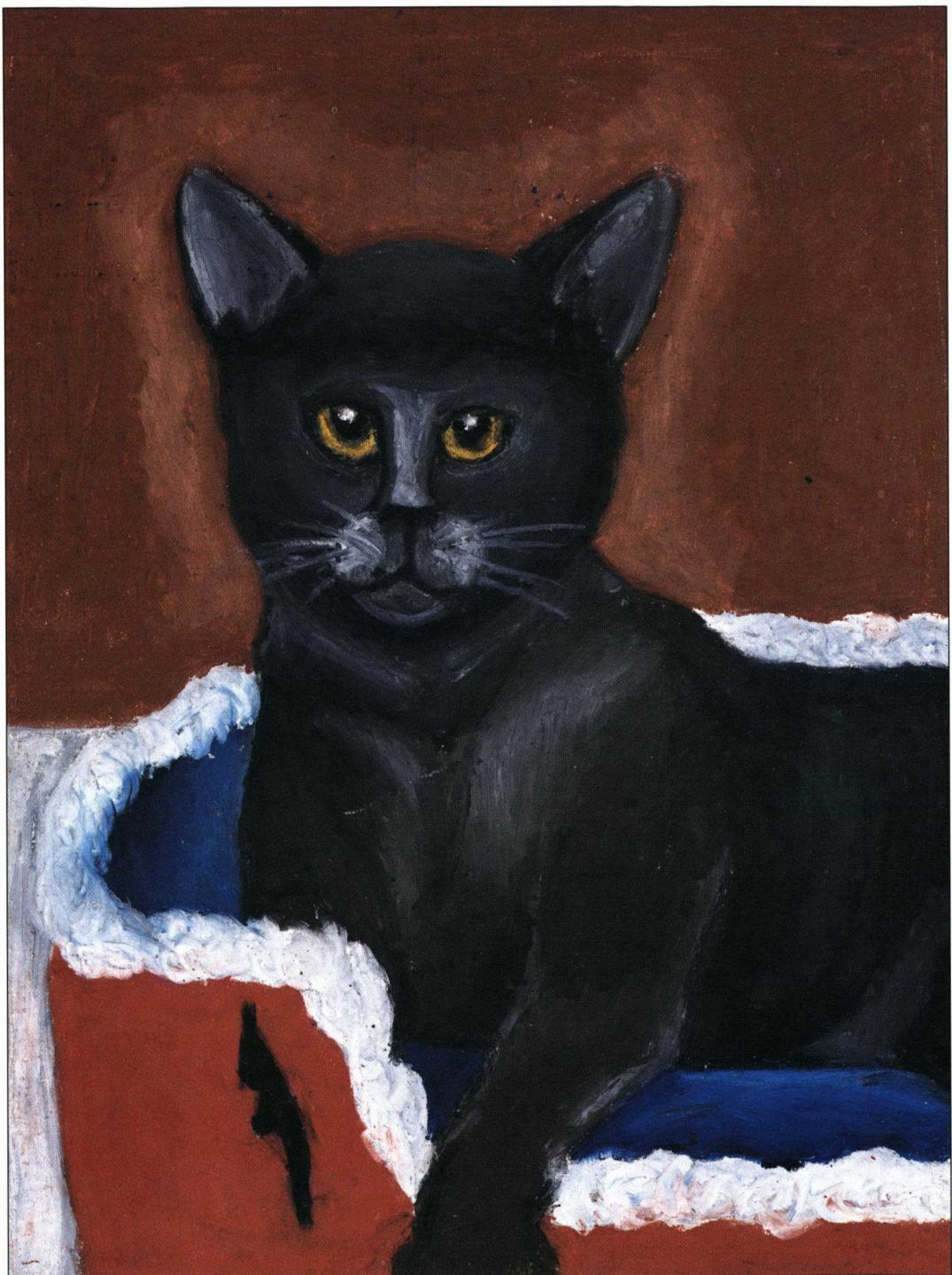
For the skinny, jet-black cat, this was high hunting time. Any vermin she saw or heard she would instantly pounce on, swallowing the little creature in one satisfied gulp. Her amazing cat senses were on in full power, alert to the max. Even the faintest rustling would point her directly to her dinner.

Suddenly, she stopped, waiting. An anxious mouse darted out of the rank-smelling garbage can, skittering into the deserted street. The cat silently followed, slinking along the ground, haunches poised and ready. She anticipated the pounce, right when that mouse stopped for just one second

...

SKREEECH! A roaring blow sent the regal cat flying through the air, and plummeting with a hard *thump* onto the cold, unwelcoming sidewalk. A searing pain instantly spread through her leg, and up her thigh, causing the stranded cat to cry out. Panicking, she tried to stand, but her useless leg slipped right from under her, settling in an unnatural position away from her body. Once again, she tried to flee; once again, she failed.

A slamming car door echoed throughout the otherwise



Two saffron, panther-like eyes stared solemnly back at Marda

silent neighborhood. Heavy boots tromped over to where the woeful cat lay. The tip of one of the boots kicked the cat over on her side, none too gently. The ebony cat continued to lie there, scared and hurting.

A voice sluggishly slurred with alcohol called back to a shadow in the car, "Jist anotha cat."

"Whatever. Let's drive."

The boots receded, and the car door slammed once again. Squealing tires raced at an intense speed around the corner . . . gone.

The cat was deserted; alone and forgotten.

MARDA ADAMS wanted a cat. But as she stared through the glass panels of the animal shelter, none of them clicked. The kittens were adorable, batting their tiny paws against the walls of the encasement, staring up at you with their round, charming eyes. The adult felines were beautiful, grooming their furs, lying regally draped over their beds.

But none of them were *right*.

"Ma'am, may I help you?"

Marda stuffed the car keys that she had been fiddling with back into her worn purse. She nervously tucked a lock of brown hair behind her ear. "Um, yes. Actually, I'm looking for a cat."

The volunteer gestured around her to all the cats in the room.

Marda gave a strained smile. "No, well, you see . . . they just aren't . . . right."

The volunteer brushed a stray cat hair off her blouse, which was decorated with smiling cartoonish felines. In a bubbly, experienced voice, she said, "Yes, of course. I can help you if you can tell me what kind of cat you want. Like, what kind you could cope with. For instance, would you prefer a hyper one or a calm one?"

"Well, it's for my son . . ."

"Ah, is he very active, or does he like to sit on the couch and read?"

Marda glanced anxiously down, then up. The lady looked on patiently. "He, uh, likes to . . . read."

The lady bowed her head. "Then I guess that would conclude that a calmer cat would probably be your best bet."

Marda nodded.

"This way?" The volunteer turned, expecting Marda to follow.

Marda obeyed.

Down the smooth-tiled hallway there lay a door marked Special Needs. The volunteer pushed on the door, holding it open.

Marda didn't know what to expect. Special Needs? This ought to be interesting, she thought sarcastically. She had had enough special needs in the recent months to last a lifetime. She braced herself for what was to come.

As the door swooshed shut behind her, Marda's eyes darted around the room. Pairs of wide, unblinking cat eyes stared down at the newcomers from rows of permanently stacked pens. The worn cat beds vividly adorned with solid, bright colors made a meager at-

tempt to lighten up the room.

The volunteer brushed past Marda, beckoning her over to a cage. "This here is Bella. She's a sweetie, aren't you honey?" she cooed, pushing her fingers through the bars to stroke the gleaming white fur of the cat.

Marda stooped down to look closer. "I don't see what's wrong with her," she remarked bluntly.

"She's blind."

"Oh." It was then that Marda noticed the glassy, almost colorless eyes.

The volunteer straightened up, pointing to the cage on top of Bella, that held a large, tawny tabby. "And this big guy is Julius. He has heart complications."

And so it went. Two rows of cats with special needs went by, until Marda noticed a small kitty, nestled snugly into its worn bed.

"What about this little guy?" Marda asked, stooping down for the umpteenth time. At the sound of her voice, the cat's regal head was lifted quickly from its resting position. Two saffron, panther-like eyes stared solemnly back at Marda, contrasting with the feline's rich, black fur.

"That little guy is actually a girl," the volunteer took her place beside Marda, "named Ebony. Or Ebb, as we like to call her. We think she had an owner sometime in her life because she's so calm."

"I see."

"We had to have her left hind leg amputated, and we recently learned she tests positive for FIV. She's had a hard time being adopted. I've seen people

love a cat, and decide to take it home, only to change their minds when they hear the kitty has FIV."

"FIV . . . what exactly is that?"

"Feline Immunodeficiency Virus. Kitty AIDS. There is a good-sized possibility she could live a long, healthy life though. Why, my friend has a kitty who's practically twenty, and has FIV!"

"I see," Marda's words were barely audible.

"Excuse me?" The volunteer leaned closer, hand cupped to her ear.

Marda glanced up. "Can I take her out?"

The volunteer beamed. "Of course. Just go into that room. I'll bring her in. Oh, and just disinfect your hands with that soap there . . ." her voice faded as she went around to retrieve the cat.

Marda stood and walked into the little meeting room for the potential adopters. She sat and placed her purse beside her on the bench. She drummed her long fingers on the bench, waiting.

Seconds later, the volunteer walked in, cradling a black bundle. The cat was surprisingly calm, her golden eyes half-closed in sleepiness.

"Here you go." The volunteer gently transferred the black feline over to the other woman's lap.

Marda stroked the glossy coat, then inspected the left back leg. Sure enough, it was missing. She felt shivers run down her spine. "What happened that made you have to amputate her leg?"

"Ebby was a victim of a hit and run."

Marda's eyes were round and ques-

tioning.

"Most likely some anonymous person hit her with his car, and drove off. The guy probably didn't want the responsibility of taking a hurt cat to the hospital." She snorted angrily. "We got her from a man who found her and was nice enough to go out of his way and take her to the hospital. She had two broken ribs and a very badly broken leg. The ribs healed . . . but the leg was so useless that we had to have it amputated. No one came to the shelter to claim her, so we took her in." The volunteer quickly patted Ebony's head.

Marda continued stroking the cat.

After a few seconds of silence, Marda spoke. "Can I adopt her?"

A BEAT-UP VOLVO station wagon rolled into the parking lot of the Bradbury Hospital for Children. Marda struggled out of the car, hefting a medium-sized pet-carrying crate. She strode up to the hospital entrance, pushing on the glass door.

The receptionist eyed Marda warily. "A pet, you say?" she questioned, peering in at the black feline nestled in the kennel.

"Yes, yes," said Marda nervously, "my son's."

The receptionist's face suddenly loosened with sympathy. "Oh, yes. Eathan." She paused. "Well . . . just keep the pet out of the cafeteria . . . we have to be sterile, you know."

Relieved, Marda sprinted to catch the elevator to level B, the cancer ward. She

stepped off the elevator, greeting the cold doctors she passed with a quick nod. She knew them well by now.

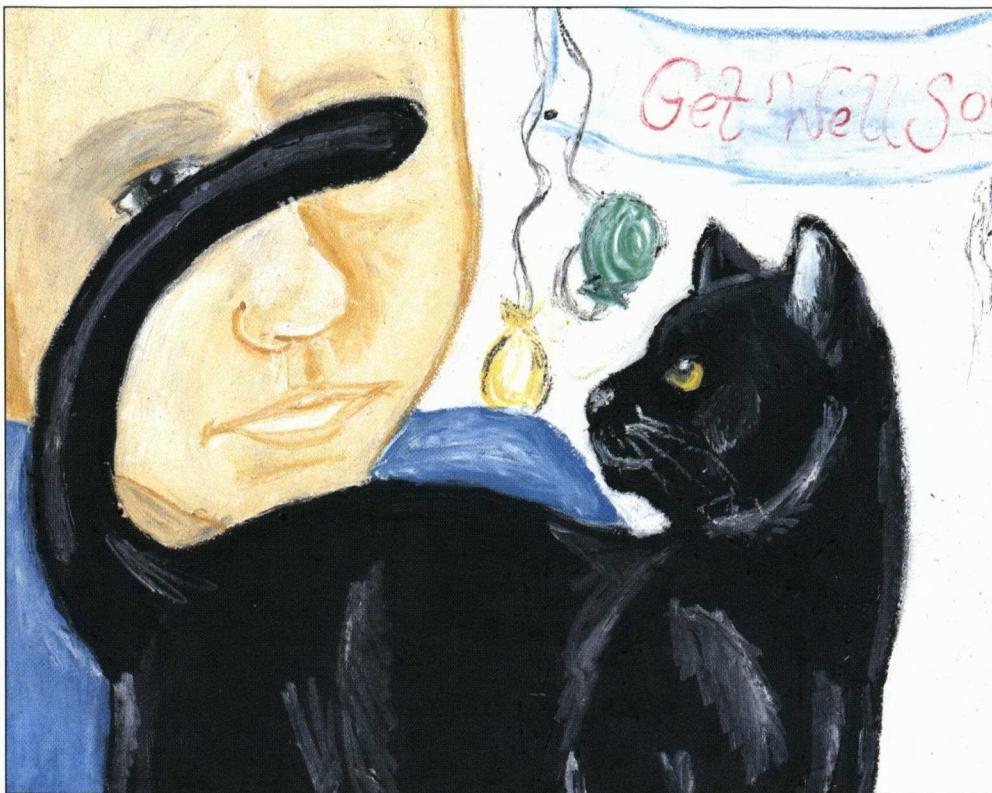
The hallway was long, Marda had been up and down it many times, but this time she was especially eager, so she walked faster. At room B15, she stopped. The door was festooned with flowers and balloons, trying in vain to lighten up the atmosphere. Marda knocked and stepped in.

Eathan glanced up from *Of Mice and Men*, which he was reading intently. Seeing his mom carrying an unknown box, he raised his eyebrow questioningly.

"Hey, Eathy. I paid a visit to the animal shelter yesterday . . ." Marda set down the crate on the itchy brown covers of the hospital bed. "You know how you've always been asking for a kitty? You know? For as long as I can remember?" Marda's statements became questions with her excitement. "I finally took you up on it! Look, look inside . . ." She turned the crate around and opened the small door. The regal black head of Ebony peered cautiously out. "I know you've been researching all about cats for a long time, so I thought you were ready to have one . . ."

Eathan sat up. He knew a cat was not what his mother would love to have around. She was wary of animals. He had pleaded with her to let him have a cat, to no avail. This was surely unexpected.

Marda anxiously scanned her son's face for a slight twinge of reaction. He



Sable crept over to Eathan, a low purr emitting from her

had been so expressionless . . . ever since . . .

The cat stretched languidly, and climbed out of the crate. She hopped around the bed, sniffing like a dog.

Eathan became aware of her gait, of her amputated leg. "What happened?"

Marda was quick to respond. "Her name's Ebony . . . She had to have her leg amputated because a car hit her . . . She also has a sort of cat AIDS . . . I forget what it's called . . . Oh, wait, FIV . . ." Marda babbled.

Eathan scrunched up his face. "Her name's Ebony? No offense, but that's a really depressing name . . . it needs to

be lighter. Sable was the first thing I thought when I saw her . . . I like that name, Sable. It means pitch-black, but it sounds lighter and happier . . ." It didn't seem as if he had acknowledged what his mother said about Sable's disease. If he had, perhaps he didn't care.

Sable crept over to Eathan, a low purr emitting from her. She brushed up against Eathan's face, her tail thwacking his nose.

And for the first time in weeks, Eathan smiled a large, genuine smile, something no amount of flowers, Nurse's ice cream, or false comforts had been able to win. ♦

Forget Me Not

by Melissa Merte



Melissa Merte, 10
Wappingers Falls, New York

FOR MOST OF MY LIFE, I have not had any pets. My brother and I are allergic to anything with fur. Then one spring, we found our first praying mantis, which changed our lives forever.

For several more summers, we enjoyed playing with these unique creatures. One particular summer, a new batch of baby praying mantises was expected. Soon we found they had hatched. One praying mantis caught my eye. She was a female and was very large for a praying mantis. We liked her right away and named her Forget Me Not. I named her this because we will never forget her and this name was also the name of a flower. Although we loved all our praying mantises, Forget Me Not was our favorite. She grew so used to us that she would climb all over us. She was the tamest of all our praying mantises, and she and I formed a special bond.

Forget Me Not would climb willingly onto me. She was as light as a feather. Her prickly claws would stick to me when she walked on me. When she was on me, I could forget all my worries and troubles because I was in a world of my own. She was as green as a meadow, and as brown as a tree trunk. She would stare comfortingly in my eyes. It was like she was trying to tell me everything was going to be OK.

Soon it grew to be mating time, and Forget Me Not mated. At the same time, it grew cold out. A few days later, we took Forget Me Not in the house, because we were hoping she



Melissa holding Forget Me Not

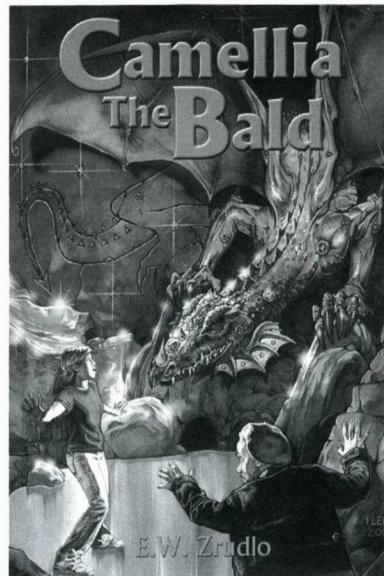
would live longer. Amazingly, Forget Me Not laid her first egg case on September 11, which gave my family hope after this tragic day. We played with and cuddled Forget Me Not. Through our gentle hands inside the warm house, she laid three silky egg cases. Then she grew to be very weak. She could barely walk or lift her prickly claws. We saw pain in her sweet eyes. We played with her and loved her. With tears in our eyes, we realized there was nothing we could do

for our beloved pet, except to love her. Soon she died in our caring arms.

Even though we could not prolong our dear pet's life, and we could not change Mother Nature, we will always remember Forget Me Not. Next year, we will have her children to raise. We knew from the first moment we saw Forget Me Not that she was special. She was so gentle, patient and loving. Forget Me Not will never be forgotten. She will always have a special place in our hearts. ♦

Book Review

by Jessica Sashihara



Jessica Sashihara, 10
Martinsville, New Jersey

Camellia the Bald by E. W. Zrudlo; Coastal Carolina Press: Wilmington, North Carolina, 2001; \$9.95



If someone asks Jon o'Gates a question, he usually talks too much and tends to digress, which means he gives unnecessary information and gets off the subject a lot. Jon o'Gates is a character in a fascinating book called *Camellia the Bald*.

I can relate to Jon o'Gates because sometimes at school, when I'm asked a question, I'll give an answer and then tell a story about something I did or experienced that has little to do with the question. Once in fifth grade, my class was discussing a book and soon, because of me, the whole class was itching to tell their own dog stories because I told mine. Jon o'Gates also likes to wander off, daydream, and frolic about before doing what he's supposed to be doing. He puts off until tomorrow what he could be doing today. So do I. My second-grade teacher once said that she wanted to "light a fire under me." Sometimes when I'm stuck on a homework assignment, I'll inch off my chair and go into the living room to play piano or watch TV. Well, back to the book.

I have two questions for you. What would you do if you

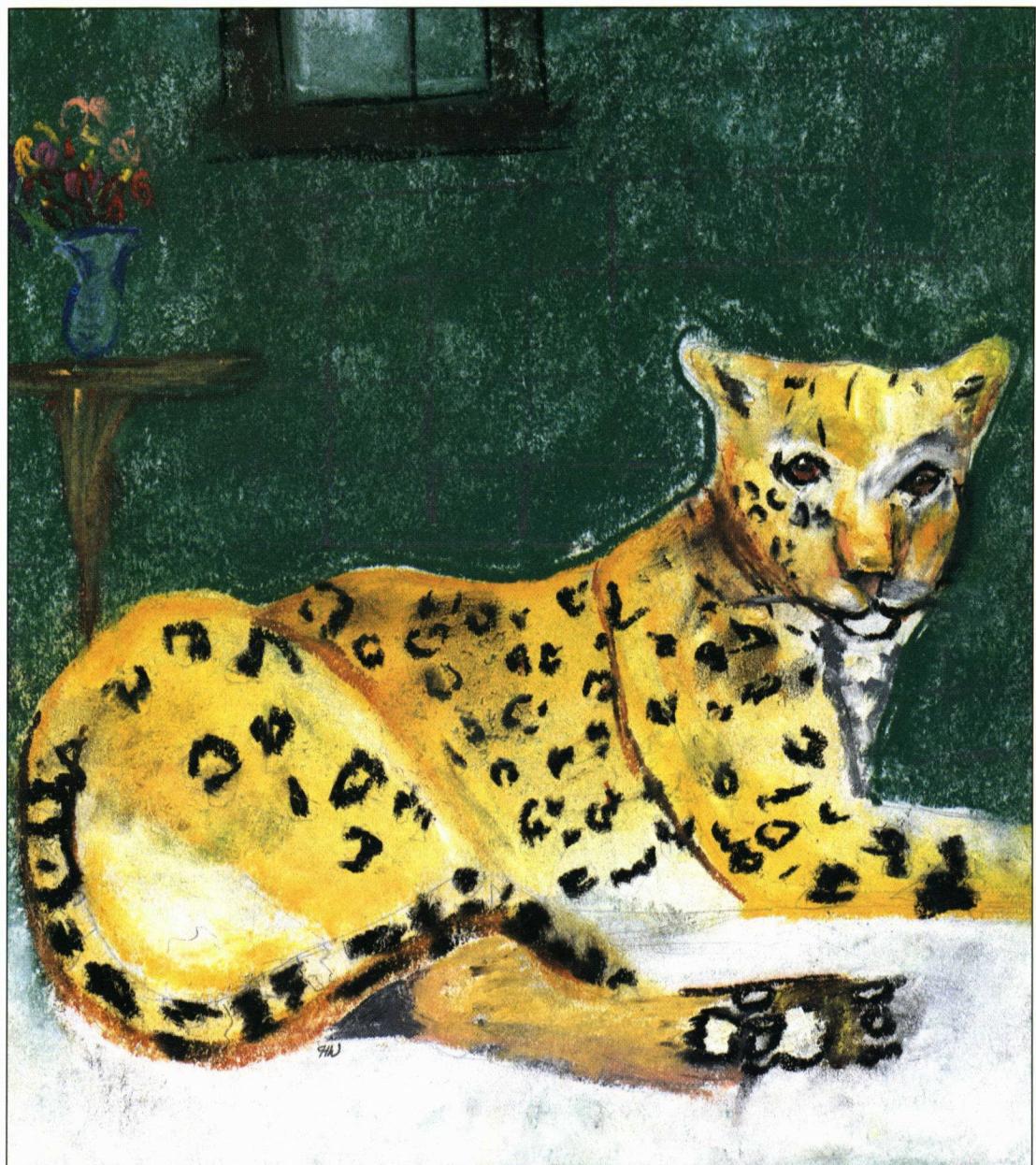
were sent away to live with your aunt, a real-live witch, and while exploring her house found an entrance to another world by climbing through a plain old mailbox? Would you be happy, scared, excited? Well, that's what happened to young Susan Camellia Cardiff, the main character in *Camellia the Bald*. She found herself lost in a place she didn't know existed. To make matters worse, she was supposedly the new queen and, therefore, it was her job to slay Glydfen—the almighty, merciless, fire-breathing dragon who flew around terrorizing everyone and everything in sight. The land Susan discovered was called Ebal. Ebal was a "queendom," not a kingdom. It was called this because only women could rule.

Most adventure stories have one hero. This one had three. They were Susan, Jon o'Gates, and Piotr. Susan was a brave, understanding girl. At home, her family thought that her mother was going crazy. She would scream and hit Susan for no reason. Susan went to her aunt's house to get away from home, and almost forgot all her pain and suffering. In Ebal, she went on a dangerous and daring adventure to the Old One.

Jon o'Gates went with her as a guide. Together they ventured through dark forests, murky lakes, and even broken stars. With every step of the way, the hikers discovered more about themselves. By working together and trusting one another, they restored peace to Ebal. That reminds me of my soccer team.

Have you ever heard the expression, "There's no I in team"? It's true. You can't win a game alone. It's a team effort. You have to trust the defense to shield the goal, the goalie to stop any shots, and the offense to communicate, dribble up the field, and score some goals. But I'm digressing again. Jon o'Gates was my favorite character. Not only does he give too much information that is unnecessary and off topic like me, but he is always willing to help and is a loyal friend. He could cheer Camel-lia up when she was scared or sad. If it weren't for his calmness and quick thinking around the man-eating dragon, he and Susan wouldn't have survived their long and frightening adventure.

Piotr was a gruff old man who spent his life cooped up at home studying an old book about the rules and traditions of Ebal called *The Histories*. Piotr helps the two travelers on their long journey and gives them numerous tips that later come in handy. In the end, Susan and Jon teach Piotr how to have fun again, and enjoy life once more. Their adventure reminds me of when I moved to my new house from another town. At first, it was scary. Eventually, I relaxed and started to have fun exploring and leaping in and out of all our new rooms. Then I met new people, saw new places, and discovered new opportunities all waiting for me to arrive. There, I did it again. I started off talking about a great adventure with a dragon, and ended up talking about moving. How did I do that? ♦



There on the floor, his tail swishing like a flag on a March day, was Kipper

The Clown Who Found a Frown

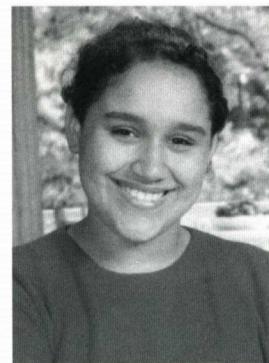
by Ashley Steever

illustrated by Holly Wist

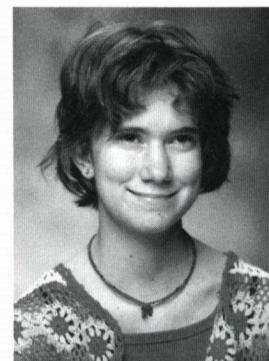


MIKON SMOOTHED ON the creamy white paint. It was cool to the touch, and felt like powder on his cheeks when it dried. Giving a *smile* in the mirror, he squirted red paint onto his palette. Ever so carefully he picked up his brush and began to paint a thin line around his mouth, nose and eyes. Gently he pulled a yellow lipstick out of his pocket and smoothed it onto his lips. He picked up a red wig, a jacket with a large star on the back and a pair of blue shoes, that squeaked when you stepped on the toe. There came a purr from behind him. He turned to face the direction from which the noise came. There on the floor, his tail swishing like a flag on a March day, was Kipper, Mikon's better half. Kipper was an Asian leopard. He was called that because he was born and raised in captivity in Asia, and then sent to a zoo in New York. Kipper had been part of Mikon's act for three years now. At the zoo they were going to put him down because he had a highly contagious virus that seemed fatal, but Mikon saved him. He bought him off. Yeah, he was still making payments on him, but he was worth it. Mikon was able to train him and make him part of the act in New York, and he'd been a shadow ever since. Mikon squatted down and fondled his ears. He gave a "thank-you" purr and jumped onto his front paws to do a headstand.

Mikon clapped and whispered in his ear, "Now do the



Ashley Steever, 13
Taylorsville, Kentucky



Holly Wist, 13
Murphysboro, Illinois

trick just like we rehearsed it; don't ad lib, 'K?'"

Kipper understood. He turned, squatted and pounced toward the wall. Standing up for the whole world to behold his skill, Kipper displayed a mouse he had just caught, and prowled out the big orange curtain separating Mikon's dressing room from the big top.

"Blech!" Mikon gagged. "That'll definitely have them rolling in the aisles."

Opening day at a circus was never easy. New town, new faces, new funny bones to tickle. Every one was different. You get used to one town, then you're leaving to go and get used to another one. The circus was a never-ending cycle.

To Mikon, the only thing he enjoyed more than rehearsing a routine with Kipper was performing a routine with Kipper, making children laugh. To make children laugh was his lot in life. Mikon snapped out of his daydream and slipped a flower into his coat lapel. Slipping out of the orange curtain he signaled the ringleader that he was ready. He waved to Kipper on the other side of the ring. He pawed at the ground to gesture a reply.

Mikon heard over the loudspeaker, "And now the amazing Zonko the Clown, and his confoundingly cute, hairball of a partner, Kipper the Asian Leopard."

At the sound of this the crowd's laughter immediately died down and the roar and applause increased tenfold. He felt invigoratingly happy, and proud

to be a clown. Mikon made a mad dash for his juggling rings. It was time to start the show. The sound of the crowd increased another tenfold as Mikon rolled out on his little unicycle, and began juggling his gray pins. He watched the other door intently, any moment now Kipper would roll out. He was right, because out he rolled. The crowd whooped and hollered. Kipper was coming closer. At that moment, something dreadfully horrible happened. The ball that Kipper was rolling on popped, sending him soaring into the air. He collided with the gate of the tiger's cage. The lock ruptured open and the tigers began to escape. The crowd screamed and began to flood out all of the exits. Five minutes later they were pillaging hot-dog vendors and looting the ice-cream stand. Mikon spotted a group of them hemming Kipper in. They were surrounding him. Mikon grabbed a hefty club, belonging to the strong man, and began to beat the tigers away from Kipper. One of the tigers came around back of Mikon and brought his claws down on Mikon's shoulder. Mikon gave a yelp of pain, which equally matched the ones coming from Kipper's direction. It was too late. The screams coming from inside the circle of tigers were horrific. Yowling probably could have been heard all over the town. In the end, Kipper's lifeless body lay limp on the floor of the big top.

Mikon was crushed. Literally. His broken body and spirit were ordered bedridden by the circus doctor. He couldn't work, he couldn't sleep, could-

n't eat. He was hopeless. The circus manager, Ronan, had to do something about it. He was losing money, and losing it fast. Without Zonko, the whole show was a laughing stock. Ronan figured it was time to give Zonko a break.

"But Ronan, I can get better, I've just gone through a rough patch, I'll get better," he repeated the second time.

"I know, Micki," he called him this, often, "but the circus is really suffering with you not on stage. It'll be better if you go home to the farm and relax."

"Relax?" Mikon questioned amiably, trying to keep his composure, "On a farm???"

"Look Micki, it's almost Christmas and . . ." Ronan paused, thinking of a sweet way to seal the deal, ". . . if you want I'll keep your space hot, until you get better."

Keeping a space hot meant that if and when Mikon felt better and wanted to come back, his old billing and stage name would be waiting.

"But . . ."

"No buts, kid; now go and get your stuff ready. Hank'll help you pack. Have a holly, jolly Christmas or whatever." Ronan turned around and went to sit at his desk and began to mumble to himself.

"Oh yeah, and one more thing," Ronan threw a bundle at Mikon and set back to his work.

He peeked inside. From what he could see, there was as much as four thousand dollars in it.

"Ronan, what's this for?"

"Oh, the zoo sent it over after they heard about Kipper; they figured that you'd be a little short so they sent a little present of five thousand big ones and said, 'Keep it, it's yours.'"

That ended it. Mikon was going home. But with a lot of cash.

"Micki" left the main office and headed back behind his orange curtain, stopping briefly only to wave at Lou-Lou, the trapeze artist. He'd known her ever since he was first joining the circus. He started as a pooper-scooper. His job was to scoop and scour out all the stalls of all the animals. From the flute-playing aardvarks to the zebras that could do arithmetic while swinging from their ankles. Yep, *all* of them. It was an easy task. Lou-Lou had introduced the idea "Zonko" to Ronan and had also recommended Micki for the job. He owed all he had to her. She did a double-twisting somersault and waved back. Mikon kept on his path for his orange curtain. Once away from the big top and into the serenity of his cubby-hole, backstage, he gently soaked a rag in warm water and began to wipe off his makeup. Tears streaming down his cheeks did most of the work for him and caused the colors to mix, creating a nasty brown color. When all the paint was wiped off he looked in the mirror. He wasn't the same guy anymore. He had changed. Carefully picking up his blue face pencil, he drew a solitary tear on his cheek and colored it in.

"That's better," he whispered under his breath.

He stepped out from behind the curtain, but not before saying a prayer. He prayed that his life on the farm would be successful, because he didn't know if he could bear returning to the circus.

On his way out Mikon said goodbye to all of his friends and to the animals.

"Oh, Micki, must you go?" Willetta, the bearded fat lady, pleaded.

He only shook his head.

"... 'ello, my friend, do you 'appen to need any of ze, vhat do you call it, oh yes, ze mooney?" asked Hank the Strongman. (He was practicing his fake French accent.)

"Naw, man, I'm living with my parents," he answered.

Hank shot out his hand for Mikon to shake. He did so and came back with three crisp one-hundred-dollar bills.

"But Hank . . ."

Hank laid his massive hand on Mikon's flimsy shoulder and said without his corny accent, "I've been saving it for a rainy day; well, kid, it's raining for you."

Mikon slid himself out from under his friend's hand and gestured goodbye. He stepped outside into what now was a torrential downpour.

Good ol' Hank, he thought to himself.

Mikon walked all along the busy streets of his hometown, Temple, Texas. The blue skies made him long to be back under the blue big top of his beloved circus. He found his way through the winding roads, taking shortcuts as they arose and as he re-

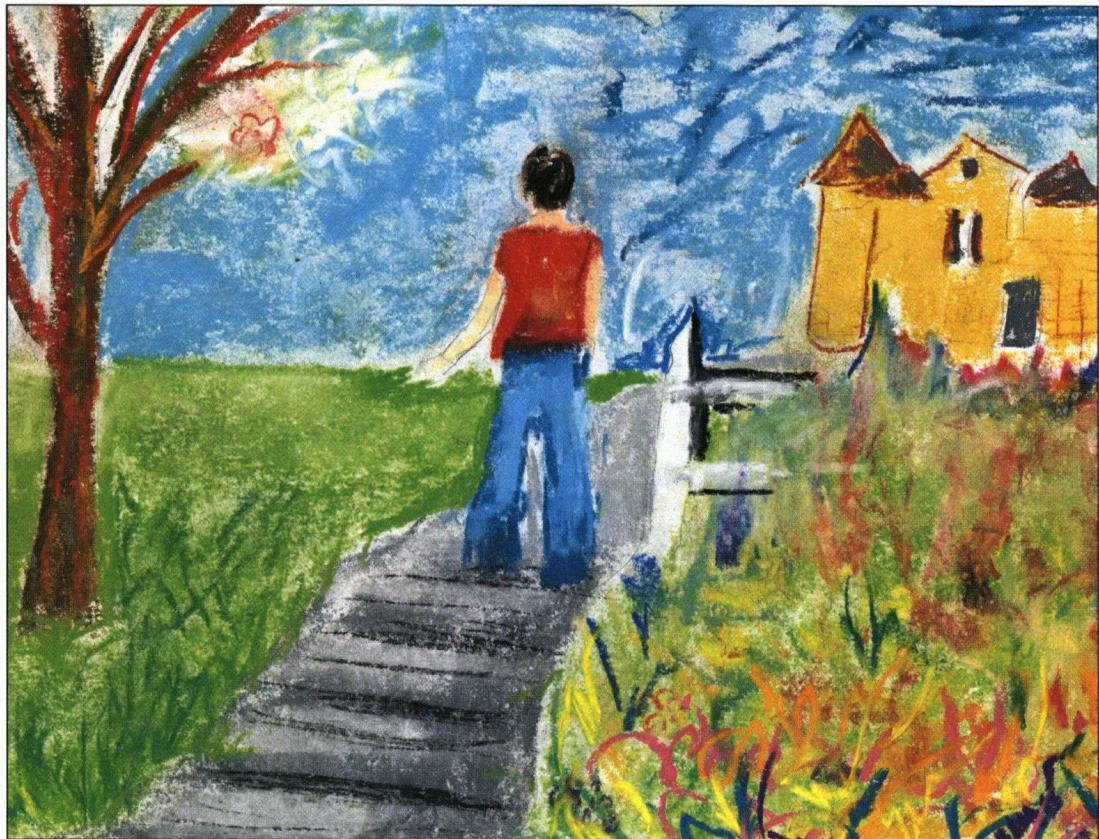
membered them, until finally he reached his parents' farmhouse. Actually, it didn't even look like a farmhouse. More like a millionaire's estate. The gardenias and roses (which seemed funny to him, seeing them so near to Christmas, after all of the places he'd been, with such cold climates nothing could grow in this season) planted around the blooming apple trees were as lovely as ever, but a little unkempt.

"Mamma must have been pretty busy to ignore her prized rose garden," Mikon suggested to himself. He sauntered up the flower-laden walkway. Stopping in mid-step he stared up at the brick residence. All of the windowsills were decked in the largest array of wreaths and garlands of spruce with holly berries and leaves nestled between the folds of shutters.

"They always did go out of the way on Christmas," Mikon mumbled to himself.

Mikon took another look at the house, at its massive presence. It stared back at him. He heard the cows in the pastures. This reminded him of the first time he rode a bull. It was the same day and by coincidence that very talent that made him leave. He wanted to join the circus.

Mikon continued the rest of the way up the path and up onto the porch. He slinked through the door and set his bags down by the stairs. He looked down and saw a deep royal purple carpet. He remembered how, when he was young, he used to pretend that he was a



Stopping in mid-step he stared up at the brick residence

king and that the whole house was rolled with this carpet, his carpet, like the red ones that the stars walked on on the way to the Emmys. Taking a sudden right into the kitchen he paused in the doorway and smiled as he caught a whiff of something in his nose. It was a pungent aroma of apples and milk. Maybe a hint of cinnamon. This was definitely a change from the dirt floors and smell of popcorn and roasted pecans at the circus. He stepped the rest of the way into the kitchen, and made his way over to the sink to wash his hands. Noticing the direction from

which the smell was lingering, he crossed the kitchen in three strides and peered into the modest Buck stove in the corner.

"Oh," he said, "Mamma must be cooking." There was baking in a pie dish the most delicious-looking homemade pie he'd ever seen, a homemade apple pie baking in the oven. Mikon decided he'd have a piece, but noticing another pie on the windowsill he took an alternate route to getting his hands and mouth burned, and decided to eat a cooled piece of pie. He searched the kitchen for a knife. Finally stopping his

search, he found one.

"Duh, Mikon," he mumbled to himself, having had the search end in the silverware drawer.

He pulled a plate from the rack above the sink and walked over to the windowsill. He was just about to cut himself a piece of pie, when a voice rang out behind him.

"Not so fast, thief, I've been wondering who's been stealing my pies!"

Mikon dropped his knife and with a clang it hit the floor. He knew that voice. Putting the plate down, he slowly began turning around. The woman saw his face and dropped the umbrella she had been using for protection.

"Hello, Mamma," the words stumbled impolitely out of his mouth.

"Mikon, is that you?" she asked stunned.

"Yes, Mamma," he answered, as his brown cheeks went pink and his blue eyes cast downward.

"Oh, my Mikon!" she cried.

She untied her apron to reveal an orange sundress with blue and green tulips, and throwing her arms in the air she glided toward her son.

"Oh, Mikon," she said, as she wrapped her arms around her son, "I'm so glad to see you!! Papa (sob) come and (sniffle) see our visitor (hiccup)!!" she shouted at the top of her lungs toward the hallway.

"Hold on!" rang a voice from up the stairs. "If it's them darned creditors again I'll . . ." he paused as he came down the last step and turned to come

into the kitchen. Dressed in his overalls and with a Sunday paper in his hand he shouted at the top of his lungs, "Mikon!!"

He ran at his son like a freight train full speed ahead, to welcome him. Mikon pulled his arm out of the way just in time, and felt a surge of pain. He let out a howl.

"Oh, Mikon, what's . . ."

"Sit down, Mamma, I'll explain everything."

They sat down at the table and nibbled at pie. Mikon explained to them his reason for being there and what had happened to Kipper. Then it was his turn for questions.

"What did you mean when you said creditors, Papa?"

"Well, son, you might as well know," he replied.

Mamma cut in, "We're losing the farm, Mikon, unless we come up with five thousand dollars; the bank has already taken possession of most of the animals we have and will take the farm if we don't come up with the mortgage money. We have until January."

Mikon made them explain everything. They did. He needed to lie down.

He made his way up to his old bedroom and settled in on the down pillows. No sooner, it felt, had Mikon lay down than it was time to get up. He roused himself, gave a immense yawn and dressed. Walking down the stairs he greeted his mamma with a "good morning."

"Good afternoon's more like it;

you've slept the day away, although I don't know if I've ever heard of anyone who was more entitled to it," his mamma answered.

"Well, well, well, look who's up with the cock."

Mikon turned, and shouted, "Prue!!" Prue was an old high-school girl-friend, and here she was, under his roof. Standing there in her tan sandals, sundress, and straw hat. He didn't know what to think. He had so many questions to ask her. They sat and talked and told each other about their professions. She was a nurse, so his mother had called her to come over and take care of him for a while. She had always lived on the farm two miles down the road. Their specialty was chickens and cows. Mikon was glad to have her by his side. He had chosen the circus over a life with her just out of college. He'd regretted it ever since. But the circus life still appealed to him.

Over the next few weeks Prue took care of him. She came every day from eight AM to six PM. Every day he grew more fond of her, and their relationship intensified. One Tuesday she came in and Mikon was still in bed. She went in to wake him and found that he was on the floor all twisted in his covers. Tugging on one end of the blanket, she rolled him out of the core of tangled covers and he tumbled onto the floor.

"Wake up!" she shouted. He didn't move. She bent down closer to his ear. "Wake . . ." she was interrupted when he turned over quick as a flash and had

her by the ribs tickling her. She giggled so hard she couldn't breathe and she started hiccupping. He stopped and she gasped.

"That'll teach you not to snatch a man's cover away from him."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. They stopped. He had her by the arm and she had her free arm around his neck. Gazing into each other's eyes, they kissed. Not a quick peck on the lips but a long, slow, passionate kiss.

"Marry me?" he whispered softly in her ear.

"Yes!" she exclaimed at the top of a murmur.

Outside the snow was falling and downstairs Mamma was cooking away. Mikon had the woman he loved and the hope of a new life within arm's reach, all he had to do was reach out and take them. Life was a bull. He grabbed on by the horns.

ONE MONTH LATER, DECEMBER 24

Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way,
Oh what fun it is to ride
In a one-horse open sleigh, hey!

ALL RIGHT, everyone! Let the opening of presents begin!" Mikon indulged in everyone's present unwrapping. He was saving the best for last.

"Listen, everyone, I've got something to say." All eyes in the room were focused on him. "Papa, Mamma, I've got something special for you." He pulled a



He never let anyone but Ella ride him

manila envelope out of his pocket and handed it to his papa. He opened it with care and read it aloud.

To Whom It May Concern:

The property of one *Trey Coulter*, father to *Mikon Coulter*, has been bought and paid for by one *Mikon Coulter* on December 19th, 2002. Thank you for acting so swiftly on our request to pay off your debts.

Cordially,
Bank President
William A. Banlie

"Ohmygosh!" Mamma exclaimed.

"Why, Mikon, how can I ever thank you, but what are we going to do with the farm? All the animals were seized by the bank."

"Thought you'd never ask, Papa," Mikon announced, "I want to ask your permission to turn it into a retirement home for circus animals. They can't be let back into the wild, they're trained, so I thought we could make a special place for them."

"That's a wonderful idea, son," Papa answered.

"I'd like to make a toast," Papa began, "to Mikon and his lovely new bride, and to this farm, may it always prosper as a growing business."

"Hear, hear," the party guests answered in unison. Mikon looked deep into his bride's eyes. "I love you, Mrs. Prudence Coulter," he said.

"And I love you, Mr. Micki Coulter, I've got something to tell you . . . I'm pregnant."

"Huh???"

SEVEN YEARS LATER

"**D**ADDY, WAIT UP!!" She came running up behind him and pulled on his jacket.

Mikon slung Gabryela over his shoulders and dug his fingers into her ribs. She giggled with delight.

"Daddy, it's my birthday and I'm seven now! You're not 'upposed to tickle me, I'm growded up!" she said with a feigning look of intelligence on her brow.

"Oh, really??" He paused, then began the tickle session again. Again she giggled with glee. Mikon loved to make her laugh. In fact, there was nothing else in the world he'd rather do than make her laugh and see her smile. Her smiling face.

"Oh now, you two, come on, the horses are this way."

The crowds at the retirement farm were endlessly booming with new visitors each year. Even though this was a retirement farm, people came from miles around to ride the old elephants and hold the monkeys. The horses were Ella's favorite place to visit. She loved riding the prancing stallions and the trotting mares. Her favorite by far was a horse named after Daddy's leopard, Kipper. Kipper the Second they called him. He was a feisty brute with blue-green eyes. He never let anyone but Ella ride him. Today of all days he was as mean as ever and rearing ferociously. Ella still wanted to ride him. They placed the little girl on the horse's saddle warily so as not to spook him.

Mikon held the rope and began to lead the magnificent stallion around the paddock as Ella squealed with delight. This spooked him, and Ella was told to keep quiet. But she couldn't keep it in; she screamed at the top of her lungs. This was too much for Kipper the Second and he reared up with such a might that he kicked Mikon in the back, sending him hurtling through the air. Ella was thrown off and out of the paddock. The last thing Mikon remembered was everything going black. When he came to he could see a few feet away, his baby was on her back, blood seeping slowly away from her, staining the clothes of the onlookers and those crouched beside her, then darkness again.

Mikon awoke in the hospital and could barely hold his eyes open. His wife was by his side, so he tried to remain calm.

"Where's Ella?" he managed to choke out.

"Don't worry about that now," his wife said, gently squeezing his hand.

"Where is she?" he managed to repeat himself.

"Honey, she didn't make it," his wife said, tears falling from her lashes.

At that moment Mikon wished more than ever that he could see his little girl

again. Make his baby smile. Longing to see her face light up like a candle. He couldn't. It was all black once more.

NOT LONG AFTER

MIKON smoothed on the creamy white paint. It was cool to the touch, and felt like powder on his cheeks when it dried. Giving a *frown* in the mirror, he squirted red paint onto his palette. Ever so carefully he picked up his brush and began to paint a thin line around his mouth, nose and eyes. Gently he pulled a yellow lipstick out of his pocket and smoothed it onto his lips. He picked up a red wig, a jacket with a large star on the back and a pair of blue shoes, that squeaked when you stepped on the toe, and sliding all three on, he remembered back. Slowly the memories flooded his brain like a tidal wave. Once again he pulled out a blue pencil and drew a solitary blue tear on his cheek.

Back behind the big orange curtain Mikon could hear the roar of the crowd. The announcer came on and introduced him. He walked slowly out to the center ring. Again the blare of the crowd intensified.

Plastering a smile on his face he searched the crowd for Prue. He saw her standing in the front row, waving a sign reading, "Make her smile!!" ♦

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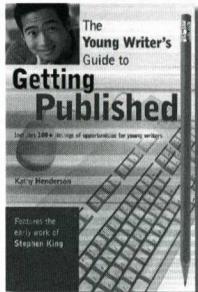
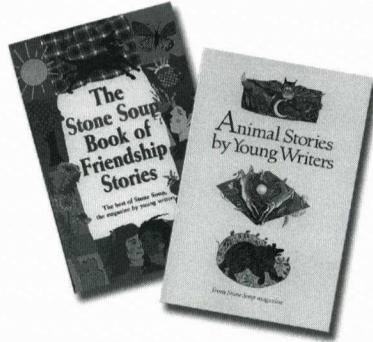
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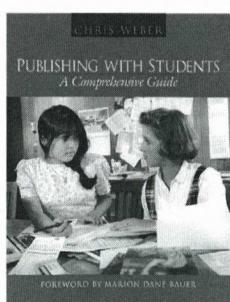
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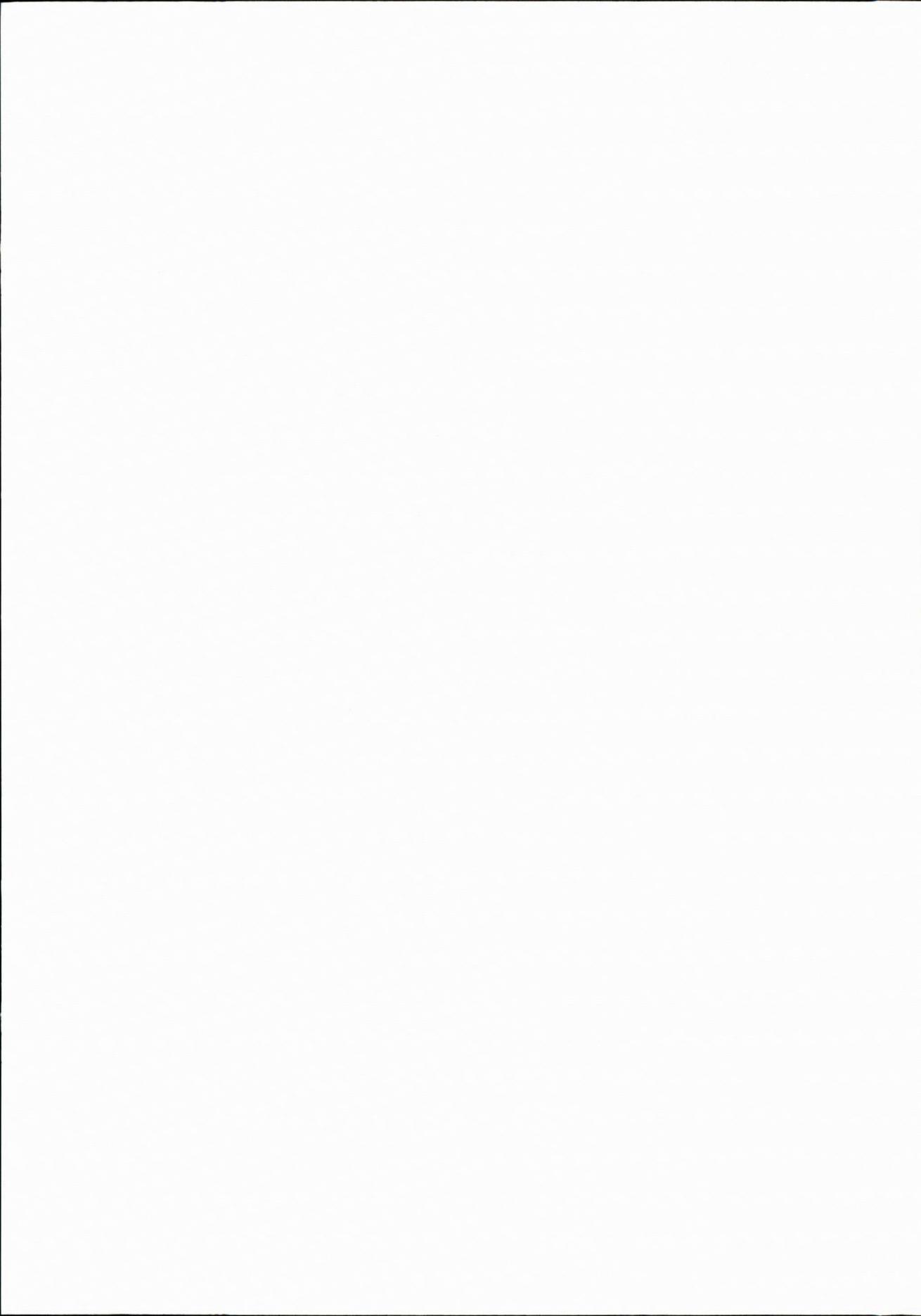
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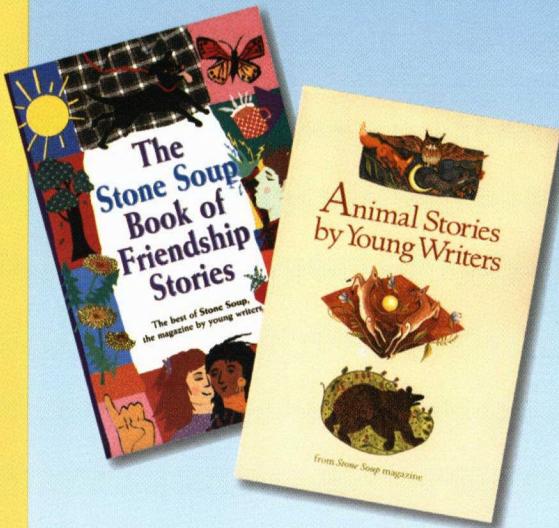
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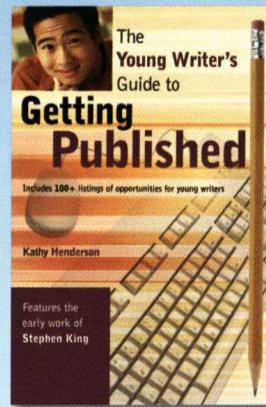
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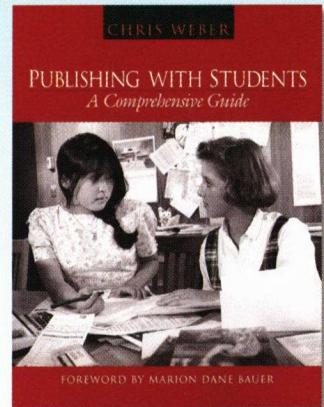
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