

Six Impossible Things

Kristen Raaen
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Artist Statement

“There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up I’ll write one.”

- Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

When I was little I loved Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. I related to Alice. I liked to play “lets pretend” and make up my own adventures. If there had been a rabbit hole in my back yard I might have contemplated climbing down it. If it had been a *really* big rabbit hole and I could clearly see Wonderland on the other side. I wasn’t really adventurous; it was my mind that liked to go places.

My family moved in sixth grade. The following year was a constant stream of challenges. When I went to write about sixth grade I immediately thought of Alice. Re-reading the Alice books as an adult, I still found them familiar. I read them again as I started planning this portfolio and realized Alice was what brought my experiences together. The different sections stood alone, but by using quotes from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* I was able to tie them together under the umbrella of the White Queen’s belief in six impossible things.

When Alice meets the White Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* the Queen tells her it is important to learn to believe in impossible things. Alice informs the queen that she does not believe she can do that, to which the Queen replies; “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast” (Carroll, 84).

This is the idea I built my portfolio around. For me, breakfast was seventh grade and I had to learn to believe in six impossible things before I could get there. The six sections of this

portfolio are built around my six impossible things: the new house, the new school, family, new friends, my glasses and beginning to see myself as a writer. These are the things that shaped sixth grade for me.

Even if we hadn't moved, middle school is important. It is the period of transition between childhood and becoming young adults. It is also a period that isn't often written about in young adult nonfiction. Writers are often so concerned with writing about the minorities that they forget the majority. The works available, both fictitious and biographical, usually focus on preteens who have experienced traumatic events in their life or have magically been invited to a new world where they can experience the life changing events that are lacking at home. Changes taking place during middle school don't need to involve death and divorce to affect students for the rest of their lives. When I went to write about my experiences in sixth grade I wanted to focus on the daily life of middle school from meeting the friends I kept until graduation, the discovery of the hobby that became my passion, and the silliness and flightiness that can only come from children on the brink of becoming young adults.

I began writing in fourth grade, and even then I was taking my inspiration from books I had read. The book that was most influential for me then was Robert O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. I loved the characters O'Brien created and his book taught me the importance of presenting characters that a reader could relate to and want to know more about. As I set out writing this portfolio I looked for situations, such as the frustration of glasses that keep breaking, which my readers could relate to.

V.M Caldwell's *The Ocean Within* taught me the importance of the narrator's own opinion of the events that are unfolding. It isn't enough to simply recount events; a reader needs to know how the narrator feels about what is happening to them. This is the tone, the emotions

the author incorporates into the story that help to tell the story. The addition of emotion to a narrative is what connects the reader to the story and makes them feel like the events are happening to them. V.M. Caldwell's influence is most clear in my own work in the stories that address meeting new people for the first time. More specifically, I have tried to show how making new friends helps a person to know himself or herself better, a theme that is similarly evident in Caldwell's work.

I looked for nonfiction works in the young adult genre that didn't address death, divorce, or Narnia, but just being in middle school, but I couldn't find anything. The closest book I found was Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. While a work of fiction, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series deals with friendship, siblings, and all the life events that are often seen as inconsequential but which pre-teens find life changing. It captures the idea of firsts and adapting to change that I strove to show in my own work.

The portfolio that follows could be best described as a memoir. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a memoir is "a historical account of biography written from personal knowledge or special sources; an autobiography or a written account of one's memory of certain events or people." I sought to write the most significant experiences of my sixth grade years, the experiences that made seventh grade seem a lot less intimidating. I wanted to provide a nonfiction memoir that sixth grade students could relate to without feeling like the world revolves around death and despair.

When I set out to write this portfolio I believed it was only for middle school age students. I wanted to write a piece of nonfiction that they could relate to. But when I thought about it, I realized there was a wider audience, that adults could appreciate the content because it helped them remember what their own experiences were like. The fifth section of this portfolio,

the war of the glasses, was originally written for a writing creative nonfiction course. When it was read to the class I found that something as simple as breaking glasses was very relatable to a wide audience. They enjoyed it because they could see themselves in the events that unfolded.

In *Theory into Practice*, Ann B. Dobie quotes Louise Rosenblatt as saying, “The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition” (Dobie, 133). Readers choose how to make a work relate to their lives. The job of the writer is to create a work that can spark recognition in the reader.

My goal was to create a portfolio of my sixth grade experiences that would find recognition amongst middle school students and adults alike. I hope that my experiences spark recognition that makes the reading more enjoyable.

Introduction

"I can't believe that!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

- Through the Looking Glass

I believe Lewis Carroll's "Alice" represents the person many of us were in that time between our childhood and adult lives. She still enjoys the games and imaginings of a child but has begun to recognize how the world around her functions and is perplexed by it. Wonderland and the Looking Glass World are the new places we step into, where we start to see who we are going to become. I was Alice when I entered sixth grade. The new house we moved into was my Looking Glass House where everything was a little different and Oak View Middle School was my Wonderland, a place that was full of possibilities that seemed slightly out of reach.

Much of both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through The Looking Glass* involve Alice being taught about the world around her and how to react to what she finds. Middle school is the transition between elementary and high school where teachers try to lead students from what they know to what they will have to know. I agreed with Alice then, that I "couldn't believe in impossible things."

For me, everything was new, inside of school and out. My family had just moved to Andover and everything was new. New house, new school, new friends, everything was new. The newness made everything seem more impossible. When the big things were thrown up in the

air it made the little things seem more stressful, even my ridiculous glasses that had been breaking for four years.

Some new things are nice and challenges can be encouraging. A new house meant my own room where I could be by myself. This was becoming important to me as I started to write outside of school for the first time. In my Alice time I wanted to be on my own with my imagination, playing “let’s pretend” without someone to interfere. I read more and more, letting new characters enter into my pretend worlds. Mary Lennox joined Bilbo Baggins and Harry Potter. Nancy Drew became friends with Meg Murry. I was buying my own books and the shelves at the head of my bed were lined with my favorites, the characters I needed to revisit.

The neighborhood was its own Wonderland. The development was still in the beginning stages and sand was everywhere. Most of the plots were empty so it was all space and few people. The only house insight was next door. It was a strange feeling being on our own. It was our own little world.

I could have done without the new school and new friends. My only comfort was that because it was sixth grade it was new for everyone. The classes didn’t scare me, but I hated the idea of being alone. If we hadn’t moved I would have been with the friends I had been making since kindergarten. While I always enjoyed being on my own, I hated to be *alone*. I needed to have someone else there. Maybe they weren’t with me constantly, but I needed them to be there.

My family remained constant. I was growing up and I was beginning to be included in more family activities. My sister drove me just as crazy as ever, though now I could shut the door on her if I wanted. Our dog was ever present, persistent in her involvement in our lives. Not everything that happened was happy, but through all of it we managed to preserve some *fun*.

At the time I hated that I didn't know what was going to happen, that I didn't know who it would happen with. But now I look back and think it was worth it. If we hadn't moved I wouldn't have had these challenges to overcome. I would have had different teachers, met different people, and maybe I wouldn't have learned lessons I needed to learn. Beginning to believe it was possible was the first step. Learning that it was possible made me who I am.

1. The New House

"Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know exactly what they are!"

- Through the Looking Glass

"26, 27, 28..."

I was sitting at the bottom of the steps, staring at the basement door. My cousins were over, along with the neighbor girl, and we were playing hide and seek. The basement was the perfect place for the game. It wasn't finished yet and there were boxes upon boxes stacked up throughout, as well as the couch, two chairs, the desk, filing cabinets, and the piano. Besides that, there was the laundry room and the storage area that had become a playroom, or at least a storage room for old toys.

"39, 40, 41..."

Daisy, our fawn colored boxer, was curled up at my feet. She wasn't allowed in the basement while everyone hid, she would find them soon enough the minute she was let in. The rule was that we had to leave her outside unless we absolutely couldn't find anyone. She didn't like being left out.

"48, 49, 50! Ready or not, here I come!" I sent Daisy an apologetic look before slipping through the door.

I found Colin, my nine-year-old cousin crouched under an end table. I only saw him at all because he moved. Ashley, the neighbor, was behind the filing cabinets. I found Jessica, my sister, in the laundry room. Really, Mom wanted the laundry room to be off limits, but we couldn't get into the playroom without going through the laundry room and the playroom had some great spots, if you could fit into them.

Drew was my age, and hadn't been found yet. When I checked the wooden shell that would soon be the bathroom, I could hear him laughing. Jessica let Daisy in but she was soon occupied with slobbering over Colin and was no help.

We still couldn't find him. He eventually came down and showed us the spot. Between the play area and the bathroom was a hollow up in the wall where he had climbed. We were just small enough to enjoy it. Jessica and Colin went on to enjoy it for a while longer but Drew and I soon grew too big. We were on the border of childhood, about to become young adults. I don't know if we understood that then, but maybe it didn't matter. We were enjoying ourselves.

I was in fifth grade when my parents began to look into moving. There was nothing wrong with the house we had, a rambler with a yard and large garden. The problem was the school. The school was... a little "rougher" than my parents liked. My dad had taught at the middle school the year before and hadn't been impressed. So they started to look at moving.

We looked in Anoka, St. Francis, Coon Rapids, and Andover. We looked at a *lot* of houses. After looking at all those houses, and pricing them, they decided it would be more affordable to build a house. It didn't take long after that. They found a model they liked behind Oak View Middle School in Andover, and a plot they liked on an arm of the neighborhood alongside the school.

The house was a split-level and they adjusted the plans to provide my sister and me with our own rooms. They were small but they were our own. My own. After nine years of sharing it was great to have a room of my own. I liked that it was a place where everything inside was mine.

We would drive over and watch as the house was built. We saw it through all stages: the empty plot, the hole in the ground, the foundation, the skeleton, and then it was a house. We put the sod down ourselves. Well, I didn't, my parents did along with my uncles and my grandpa. I hung out in my empty room, debating about leaving my closet floor empty because it was such a nice niche. Like Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden* I loved the idea of a place of my own.

We moved in June after school got out. The first night we had no beds and my parents and sister camped out in the living room watching movies. Daisy came with me to my room. The furniture came the next day and we said goodbye to our house. It was the only home I remembered, we had moved there when I was two-years-old, right before Jessica was born. It was weird to think I would never see it again.

The new basement remained storage for the first part of the summer as we settled in the rest of the house. I was in no hurry for it to be finished. It was a great place to play and my parents were rarely down there in the storage phase. The problem was they planned to make the little room into a music studio for Mom to teach her piano lessons. Lessons would start in the fall and the basement needed to be completed before this could happen.

Poppy, Mom's dad, and my uncle helped with most of the work. Along with my other uncles they sheet-rocked the basement, carpeted it, and put in the wood work. They hired someone to do the taping, and had some issues with him. They also hired the father of one of Mom's piano students to do the electric. They did the bathroom too. Mom did the painting. They put up the doors on September 2, the finishing touch, three days before school started.

I liked watching the construction of the basement. It was different then when the house was being built. The house was built by random construction workers, I never saw them much less met them. The basement was being completed by the family. Everything that was done was

decided by my parents and completed by the family or friends. We knew everyone involved. It made the house a home when it was still new and unfamiliar.

The neighborhood was still in development and our stretch could only boast of four houses but would eventually fit over twenty.

Andover was built on sand. If I dug several inches into the ground I would find clay but below that was more sand with only the occasional specks of good black dirt. But the sand was what made that summer so much fun.

A neighborhood in development has a lot of displaced sand to dispose of. Each house built had a basement and in those early stages, what is a basement but a hole in the ground? And a hole in the ground... well, you get the idea. The point is that there was a lot of sand and the developers had to find a place to put it.

That place was located roughly two blocks from our new house and encompassed a space that today contains three of the neighborhood's larger houses. Then, there were piles upon piles of sand, the perfect playground.

I was eleven and my sister was nine, so Mom didn't like the idea of us going down to these hills on our own. Dad didn't mind because he liked coming anyway. He didn't climb on them like Jessica and I did, but he like to see how much we liked doing it. He always told us how he would have loved this outdoor playground when he was a kid.

Jessica liked to play tag and other games, chasing the neighbor girl and our cousins around the sand, avoiding the weeds that began to grow by the end of the summer.

I liked to find where the biggest hills met and slide down in between them. Sometimes I would bring a book with me. Before the weeds began to grow there were hardly any bugs around

the piles so it was the perfect spot. The hills created shade, it was quiet, and there weren't any bugs. We didn't have air conditioning so no where could be warmer than the house, even a sand pile that had sun beating down on it all day. And that was important. I liked having a place that was all my own without being alone.

2. The New School

"I haven't tried it yet," the Knight said, gravely: "so I can't tell for certain – but I'm afraid it would be a little hard."

- Through the Looking Glass

I ducked into the locker bay and sat down between the rows of maroon lockers. Another tour group was passing by.

It was the sixth grade activity night/open house and I wished I hadn't gone. The idea was for all the incoming sixth graders to get to know each other, but it was really just a chance to meet friends for the first time all summer. It wasn't a night when students were eager to meet new people, which meant that I was on my own. I had taken the tour once through, then made a game of exploring the locker bays on my own, hiding when new groups came through.

The main part of the school was broken into three sections: the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade wings with their adjoining locker bays. The 6th and 7th were on the right side and faced the Family Consumer Science rooms. Family Consumer Science was just the fancy new name they had given to Home Education in hopes of making it more appealing to boys. I think the fact that we made cookies made it more appealing to boys, but that was about it. The 8th grade wing was on the left side and faced the Art rooms. These extra rooms took up half the space while the library occupied the other half. Compared to the public library, it wasn't that impressive. But compared to the elementary school library? This one was awesome. The back wall held the Tech Ed rooms. All of this was to the right when you came in the front door. To the left were the Cafeteria, Music Rooms, and Gyms.

Maybe I didn't meet anyone at the open house, but I sure figured out the school's layout. At the time that seemed more important. New friends came with the first day of school, so I

wouldn't worry about it until then. Now that I knew the school, now that I wouldn't get lost, maybe the first day would be less intimidating.

I was running late. It wasn't the most auspicious beginning of my middle school career. I had just rounded the fence when the first bell rang. By the time I reached my locker nearly everyone had gone to class. My locker wouldn't open. The stupid thing would not open. I tried it several times before scrambling for my classroom, backpack in hand and hoping Mr. Steinke would understand. (He did understand. He understood the whole first week when there was always someone coming late, but after that? Not so much.)

We started with introducing ourselves. I always hated when teachers did this, made us say our names and what we did that summer. (I moved and now know no one. Anyone want to be my friend?) I think I mumbled something about moving.

Mr. Steinke was Math. In all honesty, he was a scary looking man. He was older, he retired after that year, and had white hair and a big white/gray bushy mustache. He kind of looked like the grandfather in the Shirley Temple version of *Heidi*, without the bushy hair. He was tough, but he was a good teacher. That's saying something because Math and I didn't get along so well. Later that year I found out I was actually in 6+, the accelerated math. I couldn't figure it out. I didn't like math. I wasn't *bad* at it, but I wasn't good either. It turned out my fifth grade teacher had recommended me for the accelerated program because she thought I needed a challenge. I liked her a lot less after that.

I had Mrs. Grabowski next for English. I would have her for three classes that year: English, Science, and Homeroom. No, I'm sorry. It wasn't Homeroom, it was *Pride*. Motivational names aside, it was Homeroom. I liked Mrs. Grabowski. She was a grandmotherly

teacher, one of the ones who liked to point out how wonderful you were but expected a lot out of you. The focus of her class was speeches. I hated it. I would get clammy and nervous, all those eyes staring up at me. She always kept the topics open and broad, hoping that we would find something there that we would be comfortable speaking about. At the time it didn't help me much, but at the time I cared more about what people thought of my interests. In high school, when I realized that it didn't matter what other people thought, speaking got a lot easier. I realized that I had something to say and I wanted to say it. Mrs. Grabowski tried to teach me that in sixth grade, it just took awhile to kick in.

A big part of my first quarter of sixth grade was Exploratory with Mr. Nelson. Exploratory was when we chose if we would take band, choir or orchestra and what instrument we would play if we chose band or orchestra. It wasn't a hard class for anyone, and it was even easier for me. My dad was a band teacher, he had taught at Oak View for two years before I went into sixth grade before going to a different school. He had started me on trumpet the year before, so not only did I know what I was going to play, I knew how to play it. I knew Mr. Nelson from those two years so I was comfortable in the music room from day one.

Math, English, Exploratory and Gym were my A day. Social Studies, Reading, Science, etc. were my B day. That's right. In middle school I got the pleasure of two first days of school. I was really happy about that. Right.

Sixth grade was a lot like fifth grade in many respects. In fifth grade the teacher started saying, "Now make sure you write down the due date and have everything ready because I'm not going to remind you. This is in preparation for middle school. Your teachers aren't going to remind you about your assignments then."

In sixth grade they said, "Now make sure you write down the due date and have everything ready because I'm not going to remind you. This is in preparation for high school. Your teachers aren't going to remind you about your assignments then."

Guess what? In fifth and sixth grade, they always reminded us about our assignments. And in high school? Yeah, they reminded us to, even though they said they wouldn't in preparation for *college*. The only difference was that in sixth grade we believed them.

I didn't know what to think of sixth grade when I went in. In elementary school I was told it would be different. "Different" was a very big idea and I didn't know what to make of it. In the end I think that made it easier. I had nothing bigger to be afraid of than any other year in school: making friends and passing the classes. I could live with that.

(By the way, that locker plagued me for the entire year. And it wasn't just me. No one could open that locker without giving it the sharp kick we were told never to administer.)

Our first band concert was on February 8, 2001. When the curtain opened we were all sitting in our chairs, holding our instruments eagerly. My trumpet had been my uncle's in high school, his marching band instrument. The shiny gold had rubbed away in several places to reveal the dull metal underneath and the bell was bent in. I guessed that he had set the instrument down so it stood up, like most students did, only to have it knocked over, like most instruments were. But I didn't mind. I liked that it had a history.

Mr. Nelson walked out in front of the bleachers that were holding the parents. He cleared his throat and announced, "When we came here we had just gotten our instruments. First of all we couldn't sit."

We slumped down in our chairs.

“Then we learned to sit.”

We sat up.

“But we didn’t know how to hold our instruments.”

We held our instruments up. Most of us had them upside down, or with the bells to our faces. Some just looked at them with wide eyes like they didn’t know what to do with them.

“Then we learned to hold them.”

We all corrected our hold on our instrument, holding them up, ready to play.

“Then we learned a note, at least we thought we did.”

Mr. Nelson turned to face us, a grin on his face. He winked at us and held up his hands and cued us.

We all played our favorite note. I played E flat. I always liked E flat.

“Then we did learn.”

And we all played the same note.

Another wink and Mr. Nelson was directing us in our first band concert. If I listened to a recording of that concert now, I would probably be woefully disappointed, but at the time it was fun. We played as well as we could; short little songs from “Mexican Jumping Beans” to “Yankee Doodle” to “The Snake Charmer.” It wasn’t about *what* we could play, just that we *could* play. Together.

As spring approached Mom decided I should be involved in more school activities. So she signed me up for the middle school swim team. I hated it.

Oak View had it’s own swimming pool housed in a large bright room, but it was meant for Community Ed activities, not competitive swimming. Andover didn’t have a high school at

the time so there was no need for Oak View to host the high school teams. There were eight lanes drawn on the pool floor, to be used as guides for the swimming unit in gym. The pool got deeper in a progression out from the lower right corner, ending with the diving hole in the top left corner. Dad said the pool was too deep for competitive swimming. When I thought about the other middle school pools I had been to, I understood. They all had separate diving holes that didn't interfere with the lanes.

The premise wasn't bad. Kids from grades 6-8 could participate and it was basically an introduction to competitive swimming. A girl came down from the high school swim team to "coach" us. Mrs. Hanson, our swim teacher, was there as well, but she let Annie do most of the instruction.

Annie didn't know how to coach. Her philosophy was that if we swam enough it would click. But what if we didn't know how to swim? Sure, front crawl, back crawl, those were easy. But the breaststroke? The butterfly? I think I had done those in swimming lessons, but not well. I needed help, but that wasn't what Annie did. Mostly she would call out a ridiculous number of yards to swim, 2500 was her favorite, and we could use whatever stroke we wanted. We usually lied about finishing them so we could go home. The only parts I really enjoyed were the starter dives and the flip turns. Mrs. Hanson taught them. I liked them because they were less about speed and more about timing.

We swam a lot those five weeks, and I did get better. The only problem was that I hadn't been a very strong swimmer to begin with, so while my strokes were better now, I didn't have the endurance or the speed to really compete.

Annie might not have been an effective coach, but she knew all the team-building activities of the high school teams. She taught us cheers and made us t-shirts. Yes, at that meet

we started off with a cheer. Did I mention our mascots? We were bananas. Yes. We were fruit. Annie had decided we needed a mascot and when no one else volunteered anything she said we should be bananas so we could do the banana cheer: "Go, bananas! Go, go, bananas! Go, bananas! Go!"

There was also a dance that went with it where we pretended to be bananas. We put our hands together over our heads and "peeled the banana" while doing the banana cheer. I was more in it for the tie-dyed yellow shirts with the sparkly flowers. I would have been more into it if she would have spelled my name right on the back.

We might have lost every race at the meet that came at the end of the five weeks, and I don't think anyone on that team went on to the high school team, but we learned about working together as a team and supporting each other. So something came of it.

I did grow to be comfortable at Oak View. Except for gym. I was never comfortable changing in front of other girls in the locker room. I purposely wore skirts on Gym days so I could slip on my shorts or pants underneath. That was after the teacher got mad at us for waiting in line to change in the bathroom stalls.

In fact, I got so comfortable in the sixth grade wing that during the first week of seventh grade I went back into Mr. Jones' classroom. It was nice in a way because I wasn't new to the school anymore. I had a place I could go back to where I had been comfortable. Luckily, when I recognized no one, I figured out what I had done. I was almost late for my real class.

3. Family

"You can't think how glad I am to see you again, you dear old thing!"
- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

The summer after we moved Jessica became obsessed with Monopoly. She wasn't alone in her obsession, the neighbor girl joined in. That pleased me to no end since I absolutely *adored* spending time with Ashley. The girl who told me I was spelling my name wrong. Who *does* that? To answer that, the blonde going-to-be-fourth-grader next door.

But Monopoly. They started playing one day and it carried over to the next, and the next. Soon they decided that as much as they loved the game, it just took too long. So they made a short version. They took all the property cards, shuffled them and dealt them out. When they dealt the money they got an extra 500, two extra 100s, and two extra 50s. Then they divided up the houses and hotels. When all this was done they could make deals and trade to make their monopolies and start purchasing houses and hotels.

They played Monopoly so much that summer that they knew exactly how much it cost to buy hotels without going through each of the houses. Jessica could tell you how much it cost to land on any square at any level.

Playing this way they could go through at least one game a day if not several. They still mostly played until they were bored. Monopoly is a really long game.

They got bored with the regular Monopoly, so Jessica expanded. For Christmas she got Disney Monopoly and Dogopoly. And at our grandparents' house (they lived in Fergus Falls) we played Fergusopoly. That game was actually cool, it taught us about all the businesses around town.

Jessica and Ashley became authorities on the game. They knew all the rules, even the ones no one else bothered to learn. Of course, like all true Monopoly players, they didn't share those rules if it wasn't to their benefit.

When this first began Mom and I played with Jessica. Dad wasn't into board games. But there was one little problem. Jessica was a bad loser. Mom insisted on playing the real way, which made the games likely to take a long time. That meant if Jessica was losing, the games didn't get finished. I liked packing up the game and writing a list of where we were when we stopped for the night. Jessica would go along with this, as long as she was winning. If she was losing the list would disappear. That's when I stopped playing with her.

Jessica and I had a complicated relationship. I was two years older and she had all the younger sister traits that drive big sisters nuts. She knew exactly how to push my buttons so I got mad, and knew exactly how to time my outburst so I was the one to get in trouble.

That was one of the nice things about being in middle school. My sister wasn't yet in the school so it was a place that was all mine and because the middle school got out an hour earlier and she took the bus I had plenty of time to walk home and be home without her. I began to feel like I was really older. I was closer to growing up than she was, she was still in *elementary* school. Mom said that meant I should be able to rise above the little things. I thought it meant I should be able to get the better of her.

Jessica's new friend Ashley made that more complicated. Mom and Dad liked Ashley. In the spring before we moved they would drive over once in awhile to see the progress being made on the house. Ashley's house was being built across the street and her parents had the same idea.

Jessica and Ashley met on one of these visits. They started playing in the sand and stayed friends through middle school.

I didn't like Ashley. She was already around, practically part of the family. When we decorated the sheetrock wall in the playroom, Ashley got her own section. I sat there biting my tongue, wanting to know why she got a part of our house. When my cousin came from Connecticut to visit, one I never got to spend time with, Ashley was there. When my birthday came around, Ashley was there.

That fall it became a habit for me to meet Jessica at the bus stop. Some days I would bike and others I would walk. When I walked I would take Daisy with me.

Daisy knew our routine. She knew when we left and she knew when we were coming home. Every day, when 4:00 came around, Daisy would go down to the entryway and wait. I would be up in the kitchen reading and I would glance down to find her looking from the door, to me, to her leash, and back round again.

At 4:15 I would go down and hook her up. Sometimes Mom or Dad would come, and we would make our way two blocks down, past the sand hills, to the bus stop. The four lots containing the sand hills were directly across from the bus stop and we would often wait on one of the taller piles.

I usually arrived a bit before the bus arrived but this day I had been running behind and as I rounded the corner to the stop I saw my sister's bus disappearing into the distance. I didn't hurry as I approached the stop, expecting to see my sister and her friend. Only, when I arrived, they weren't there. I stood still for a moment before running back home, Daisy pulling me along.

Jessica had a long bus ride but she usually had Ashley to keep her company. It was long enough that once, when Ashley wasn't there, Jessica fell asleep and missed her stop. At the end of the route the bus driver realized she was still there and brought her back. She had arrived home an hour late in tears. All I could think was that this had happened again.

When I got home Mom called our neighbor and confirmed that Ashley had ridden the bus that day. The chance of both of them missing their stop wasn't likely. Mom sent me back down to the corner, assuring me that the bus I had seen wasn't my sister's. I didn't believe her.

Despite this, I returned to the stop, sat on the corner and waited, staring down to the left in the direction the bus always approached from. Daisy lay flopped at my feet, head on her paws. I was worried, scared. With Ashley on the bus as well it seemed unlikely that they had both missed their stop, which could mean bad things. What could have happened if they had been dropped off but weren't there?

I waited ten minutes, the possibilities whirling around my mind. Maybe she had missed the bus and was at school. Maybe it hadn't been her bus and hers had been in an accident. In elementary school the bus always seemed like it was about to tip over as it turned onto the school's street. Or maybe one of those kidnappers they were always telling us about had actually appeared.

Just as my brain began to feel exhausted with the maybes, I heard footsteps. I looked up from my seat on the curb to find Mom standing over me.

She didn't look happy, but she didn't look scared either. She was quiet a moment before telling me that Jessica was home. Apparently when Jessica and Ashley had seen that I wasn't there they took advantage of the fact and hid in the sand piles. They had watched me run home and come back and while I waited for their bus they had gone home.

I sat there in silence, fear turning into anger that my sister wouldn't consider that I would worry about her, that I wouldn't wonder what had happened. I went home with my mother, Daisy calm as ever, and I never confronted my sister about the incident. Mom had asked me not to, but that didn't usually make a difference. I had no problem telling my sister exactly what I thought. It just seemed that this time, not saying anything said a whole lot more.

Avis was Grandpa's younger sister. I had met her once. She was already sick and their older sister, Meredith, was staying with her. We had gone with Grandma and Grandpa to visit and she had spent the entire visit teasing Grandpa about his childhood temper, eyes bright with laughter. I would never have guessed she had cancer, had had it for a long time.

I don't think my cousins had ever met her. While we went to see Meredith at least once a year, Dad's brothers didn't visit their father's family. I don't know that they really visited their mother's family either, but they came to the funeral.

The church was old and white and the gathering hall had been built on later so the church was a maze of rooms and halls with no one in them. Drew and Colin had sat next to my sister and me throughout the service. Following the funeral everyone had gone down to the gathering hall for the luncheon. We went, but we finished quickly and escaped to explore. We moved quietly, worried that someone might catch us and deem our activities inappropriate for the circumstance. Well, I was worried. Drew was our leader and I don't know how worried he really was.

We did get caught twice. Once by the pastor, who smiled and pointed to a spiral stair, urging us to try going that way. The second time was by Karen, Avis's daughter. I thought we

were in trouble then, so I didn't expect her to be happy about us running around the church at her mother's funeral. But I didn't know Karen. She laughed and asked us if we were having fun.

I know Karen better now, and the response doesn't surprise me. And from what I've heard about Avis, she would have approved as well.

4. Making Friends

“Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next.”

- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

“How about you?” Laura asked. “How is school going?”

I sat on my bed with the phone to my ear. It was already growing sweaty against my face despite the faint breeze coming in my window. It was the second week of school and my fifth call with my old friend. The calls gave some semblance that we were still meeting at the bus stop and waiting to go to school together. It wasn't that we didn't have other friends, we did, but we had been friends since kindergarten.

“I have good teachers,” I said vaguely. “Though Mrs. Grabowski told us that we're going to start making speeches soon. That should be *real* fun.”

Laura laughed. She didn't press things.

I was never good at making friends. I had met Laura at the bus stop our first day of kindergarten. Our mothers had squashed us together with our backpacks on and bus information pinned to our dresses to take a picture.

Anyway, I didn't have a lot of friends, but I was close to the ones I had and didn't hurry to replace them. I didn't meet people quickly; I preferred reading and daydreaming to making friends.

When I walked into school the first day I knew two sixth graders: a girl who had been in my dance class for one year and a boy from my church whose name I didn't know. I didn't have classes with either of them.

By the end of the year I would have made friends with Amanda, who I would go to Germany with seven years later. I would meet my reading teacher's daughter Emily who would get me to join tennis, help me pass math, and become one of my best friends. I would have another friend move away when Lindsey left for Utah. I would learn that friends outside of school were just as important as I got to know Anna. And I would learn that boy's name.

Amanda and Lindsey

I met Mandy within the first two weeks of school. I'm still not sure how it happened, but one day I found myself sitting at her lunch table with her best friend Lindsey, her boyfriend Jim, and his friend Jory. We didn't like Jory.

Amanda was... energetic, enthusiastic, and a hundred other things. She played soccer and hockey and worshipped the UND fighting Sioux. Amanda was the friend you weren't entirely sure why you had, since you had nothing next to nothing in common, but you got along. In a school where I was alone, Amanda understood.

That year I was probably closer to Lindsey. We didn't have any classes together, only lunch, but that was enough. Where Amanda was tall, blonde and blue eyed, Lindsey was short and stout with dark curly hair and darker eyes in her round face. She looked like she was always laughing, and she usually was.

Lindsey didn't live far from me and a few weeks into the school year we started walking together. Lindsey technically lived far enough away to take the bus, but while it was a 20 minute walk for her to get home, it was two hours on the bus.

We would walk back to my house where Mom and Daisy, our boxer, would meet us. Then the four of us would continue on through the deserted back development until we got to

Lindsey's house across Nightingale Street. It was a wind down at the end of the day that carried us through to winter.

There weren't sleepovers or anything in these friendships, they were simply someone acknowledging my existence. At the beginning of that year it was all I wanted.

Emily

I met Emily in homeroom. We were several weeks into school and I had long noticed the girl at the front of the classroom who read just as much as I did, but I had never ventured to speak up. Emily was my reading teacher Mr. Jones' daughter, but that was all I knew about her.

One day early in the winter I glanced towards the front of the room and saw *Dear America: Voyage on the Great Titanic* lying in front of Emily. She had been watching Mrs. Grabowski go over the day's announcements but now she picked up the book and continued reading. Throughout the period I glanced between my book and Emily, wondering if I dared to say something.

When the bell rang I got up, still not resolved in my decision, but when I walked to the front of the room I stopped at Emily's desk. I scuffed my foot on the floor until she looked up.

"That's a really good book," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "Do you like it?"

Emily looked up at me, considering. "Yes, but I've read it before."

I relaxed then, soothed by the familiarity of someone who loves a book enough to read it again.

We were friends after that, as silly as it seems. Neither of us were outgoing, we preferred to sit off to the side with our books, but it was always better to be able to share the book with someone else.

We were in the library picking out books when Mr. Jones stopped me. "Emily is really excited about tonight."

I smiled shyly. I didn't talk to my teachers much and it was weird that I was now friends with one of my teacher's kids.

"Do you have any pets?"

I was surprised at the question and I nodded. "A dog."

He nodded. "Emily loves dogs."

I nodded again and he walked away.

Emily did not love dogs. Her face turned white as a sheet when she saw Daisy, and dogs don't get much more harmless than Daisy. It was with relief that she agreed to go outside in the snow. We built snow forts with the new piles of snow, using the boulders the plow had left to form the outer defense. A snowball fight ensued and we went back into the house for hot chocolate.

It's easy enough to be friends with someone in school when you'll cling to anyone who has even one similar interest. Once at home, with just the two of you, you find out if you really have what it takes to be friends.

Emily had two little brothers; one who was four years old and the other was seven. She would make up games for them to play, and for us to play with her. She would have so much

enthusiasm that she could make it fun even if you were sure it wouldn't be. Within that first day at my house she had made a ring in the basement and was sumo wrestling with Jessica. I joined in one round but it didn't take much for her to knock me out of the ring, so I resolved to watch.

Maybe it helped that Emily and I both had so much in common. Both of our fathers were teachers. We were both the oldest. We both liked kid's games and kid's movies. We both worked hard in school. We both had sheltered childhoods. All in all, it was the foundation for a solid friendship.

Our favorite activity came with the arrival of a DVD player and a copy of *The Princess Bride*. We loved that movie and watched it almost every time we were together. Our first time sitting down with the new remote and we figured out how to repeat small segments of a movie. We traded grins and skipped to one of our favorite scenes.

Wesley and Buttercup have just escaped the lightning sand and Buttercup is positive they will soon die. Wesley reassures her that they now have the upper hand since there are only three dangers to the fire swamp, two of which they have faced and identified.

Buttercup turns to face him. "But Wesley, what about the ROUS-es?"

A "Rodents of unusual size? I don't think they exist."

POW! B

A "Rodents of unusual size? I don't think they exist."

POW! B

And so on. It was fun. We ended up rolling on the floor laughing before skipping several scenes back and rattling off rhymes with Fezzik and Inigo Montoya (You killed my father, prepare to die!).

We might have been a little geeky.

Anna

I met Anna in the church children's choir in third grade and I didn't like her. She would sit in the back and talk. And talk. And talk.

Her parents were in the adult choir and at mass she would sit with her sister in the front row and talk. And talk. And talk.

She drove me nuts.

But our sisters were best friends. I guess it just seemed logical that we would reach the same point someday.

Someday happened in sixth grad in religion class. (Remember that boy whose name I didn't know? He was in that class too. His name was Dan.)

Anna was red haired, freckled, and full of personality. She was a theater girl, no surprise, and life was a production.

Mom taught the class, so there was no talking out of turn. Once she managed to stay quiet I was able to find out Anna was a nice girl.

I had been involved in church activities since Mom started working at the church but for the first time I had someone to do them with. We did Sunday School, Carnival, Middle School youth group, pumpkin carving, choir, and the Appreciation dinner. Activity nights I still brought Laura to.

We would bring Jessica over to Anna's house and bring Anna back with us. We both got a break from our sisters that way. Anna and I didn't really have much in common. We barely had anything in common. We had church in common. At the time that was good enough. If you're going to do things at church it's more fun if you have someone to do them with.

Conclusion

On the bus, Lindsey looked over at me. "I heard that the princess is really a werewolf. *That's* why she has to hide at night."

I stared at her in awe. I had never seen a movie with a werewolf. In fact, I hadn't even *read* about werewolves, except for in *Harry Potter*, and considering Professor Lupin's status as a friendly werewolf, I didn't think it counted.

It was our sixth grade end of the year field trip and we were going to see *Shrek*. The movie had been out for a month but somehow no one had been to see it. Either that or they were really good at keeping their mouth shut.

Lindsey turned in her seat to look at Amanda. "What do you think?"

Amanda met her eyes seriously. "I don't think you know anything."

Lindsey glared at her before looking out the window.

I smothered laughter and Amanda grinned at me.

Maybe the year hadn't been so bad.

5. War of the Glasses

*"I only wish I had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone.
"To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as
much as I can do to see real people, by this light!"*

-Through the Looking Glass

Almost every kid who has glasses has one experience in common: the moment the glasses break. It will come at the worst time and result in a sickening sensation followed by annoyance. If it wasn't bad enough that we had to wear the things, now we had to worry about them getting fixed so we could see again.

My first pair of glasses settled on my nose in second grade. The telltale signs had led my parents to bring me to Pearle Vision that first time. I squinted at the board and overhead screen at school, making copy errors on class work. I don't remember if my teacher brought this to my parents' attention or if they had noticed my squinting in church, struggling to read the hymns on the large screens.

The frames I chose were golden with thick, firm arms of reds, greens, and brown. Earthy tones, probably not ones other seven-year-olds would have chosen. As proof, while my choice was fitted my five-year-old sister tried on hot pink and purple glasses, bemoaning the fact that her vision was perfect. They were Laura Ashley children's frames, I later found out my grandma had the adult model. When I got the glasses I didn't pick them for the style or how I thought they looked on me, I picked them because I thought they would stay on. The last thing I wanted was to be in dance class doing *chainés* turns across the floor and have my glasses go flying. I had my priorities. It couldn't hurt for gym or the playground either.

I didn't get along with the new addition, and my choice didn't care for me either. Glasses for children should be built to be durable. Disney knew it, Barbie knew it, but somehow Laura Ashley missed the memo.

In the six years I had those frames they were nothing but trouble. The screw that held the frame tight around the lens would pop out frequently and without warning, so that by the time I turned eight I had my own set of tiny screwdrivers, meant for battling my persistent enemy.

My vision spiraled downhill and by the end of that first year my glasses were a permanent annoyance, and it soon became clear that the rebellious screw was not the only problem I would face. The arm broke, repeatedly, and every time it did the glasses had to be brought in. It was worse when the model soon went out of stock; then the part needed to be ordered, which prolonged the ordeal for days.

My glasses broke for the first time in fourth grade. On the playground. Go figure. To make it worse this was right before my dance recital. We were doing *The Wizard of Oz* and the girls of my class were the munchkins. My mom had brought in my frames for repairs, leaving me blind at home, and once there she received the unfortunate news that the part was not in stock. They were sorry, it would be a few days before it came in but they could attach a temporary arm until then. Was that okay?

I think I cried when my mom came home with the temporary mutation. Attached to my earthy frames was a bright blue, wiry arm. Resettled on my nose, they were lopsided and loose. The problem was obvious to me, even though my mother didn't seem to understand it. I had picked the pair I had because they were tight to my face, perfect for dance, and this mutation didn't qualify.

Mom talked me around, assuring me that it was only temporary and my glasses would soon be restored. I had no choice so I decided to make the most of it as we got ready for the show.

Standing in the wings that first night, waiting for my entrance, my heart pounded. The adrenaline of the performance was invigorating. Even after four years of previous performances, the thrill of the show was the same as it had been when I was five.

Our costumes were bright, as it should be for any true munchkin of Oz. We had satin white leotards with hot pink tulle at the sleeves and neck. Our skirts were puffed out with the same hot pink tulle. The skirt itself was diagonal stripes of fluorescent pink, green, blue, and yellow. The top and bottom of the skirt was trimmed with hot pink sequins and hot pink ribbons acted as suspenders to hold the skirt in place.

On stage, Dorothy met Glinda and we were called out. I remember little of my dances over the years, but this one had a lot of turns.

Somewhere in the middle of the dance we all lined up down the center of the stage. From there we started turning, moving outwards in tight circles.

Spot-turn, watch where you're going. Straight line. My brain whirled. Focus, don't crash into Katie... I can't see!

My glasses flew off my nose in the opposite direction as my destination, the red taped spot on the floor. I froze before darting blindly after them. Everything was a blur of color and motion and my heart-pounded as I searched, hoping I wouldn't find them in worse condition than they already were.

The dance continued around me as I darted behind the cardboard shrubs surrounding Dorothy's house, and there they were. I shoved the offending object back on my nose, wiped away a few treacherous tears, and slipped back into the dance.

The search probably didn't take more than 30 seconds, but it felt like longer and I was certain that I'd ruined the scene. I had felt like a blundering fool as I broke from the routine, so I was surprised when my dance teacher only smiled sympathetically at me as I left the stage before focusing on the next dance.

When I talked to my family later they said they hadn't realized I was doing anything other than what I was supposed to be doing during the dance. My glasses were small enough that the audience in the large auditorium didn't notice them as they flew off towards the bushes. Without an obvious cause for my break from the other girls, it was assumed that my dash was part of the choreography.

The day after the performance the new arm came in and my glasses were mended; things went back to normal. I was cautious for a long time after that, frequently pushing the frames back up the bridge of my nose, determined to keep them from harm.

My struggle with my glasses came to a head in the spring of sixth grade. The spring of sixth grade was full of water. We had a lot of snow that winter, a fact that had supported cross-country skiing in gym. I had found the experience cold, wet, and exhausting. Another reason to hate gym.

But the snow had melted now, giving way to large puddles. The puddles formed at the corners of our neighborhood: long, wide, and deep. Our neighborhood was shaped like the big

dipper and I lived out on the handle. The biggest puddle lay at the bend in the handle, about fifty yards from my house.

I would get home from school around 3:15. Once home I had a snack. Mom was usually home by the time I arrived but if she wasn't she would be calling soon to make sure I was there and to tell me where she was and when she would be home.

When she got home I would change into my worn Twins sweatshirt and go out to my bike. Silver and blue, it was sprinkled with dirt from other expeditions. I would fasten my shiny purple helmet to my head. Why purple? Mom picked it out, technically for my sister who was a big purple fan, but I needed it more at the time. So I had a purple helmet. The routine that followed had become automatic.

Down the driveway, over the annoying bump at the end. Push my glasses up the bridge of my nose as they slide down before picking up speed down the street. I circle the square of the neighborhood several times before heading back, pleasantly numbed by the cold air. On the way back I aim for the largest of all the puddles.

It's important to enter the water at just the right speed. Too fast and I would be soaked by the spray, too slow and I'd lose momentum part way. That had happened before and the resulting loss of balance left me just as wet as if I had gone too fast.

I entered right, coasting through with the perfect amount of spray. Soon I was home, parking my bike in the garage.

I continued this routine for the next month while the puddles remained. Dad found it amusing because I always wore the same thing and came back slightly dampened from the

experience. Several times my tennis shoes were soaked through from having put my feet down in puddles deeper than they seemed, but I wasn't discouraged.

One day when I returned to the garage and removed my helmet, my glasses fell to the floor. I frowned as I reached for them, then my eyes widened. The arm was gone.

No wonder they had fallen off! With my helmet off my head there had been nothing left to hold them. I glared at the frames for a moment before settling them back on my nose, not believing that after all these years they were still out to get me. I mean if a five-year relationship doesn't give you a reason to stay together, what does?

I walked to the door that led from the garage to the house and pushed the door open just enough for me to stick my head in. Dad lay on the floor in the living room with our boxer, Daisy, and he looked up as the door opened.

"I have to go walk the neighborhood," I said sourly. "The arm fell off my glasses and I don't know where."

He made a dismayed face before getting up. "We'll come with. Jessica's bus will be back soon anyway, we can meet her at the stop."

Daisy bounced to her feet, eager for a walk. (We had gotten Daisy when I was four-years-old. I wanted to name her Minnie, as in Mouse, but Dad wouldn't go for it. So I settled for Daisy, as in Duck.) She raced Dad to the entryway and sat down, stub wagging as she waited for her leash. The dirty pink leash was soon fastened and we headed out the door, Daisy the only one truly happy about the situation.

We had circled the neighborhood twice with no luck by the time my sister's bus pulled up to the corner where our street met the rest of the greater square. Dad, Daisy, and I stood on the

grass waiting for her and we were startled when she bent down and picked something up from the pavement next to the drain. She looked at me with a frown and held up the offending arm.

Once home it was clear to see that there would be no easy repair. Poppy was called and he arrived with the only possible solution, super glue. A battle took place and soon the arm was fastened straight, never to bend again.

The snow melted, the puddles went away and I stopped biking. The glasses had kind of taken the fun out of my adventures.

There was no more denying it; my glasses were more trouble than they were worth. There was only one obvious solution. I got contacts.

In fourth grade Mrs. Ellingson read my first attempts to write. Maybe it was because everything I knew she had taught me, but it didn't worry me to have her read what I wrote. Jenny read my first stories, and I read hers as well. We were at the same place, just starting to break into new possibilities. I didn't mind sharing with her. But I never let anyone else read anything I wrote. I didn't even let my mom read anything until I was a senior in high school. I knew I loved to write, but I was terrified of rejection. The only way to keep writing a positive activity was to keep it to myself. But I didn't want it to stay private forever.

In sixth grade, writing wasn't the hobby it had been in fourth. I was thinking about it more seriously and it was becoming something more important to me. I was wondering if getting published was a possibility.

A good part of this came from Mrs. Grabowski. In sixth grade you didn't hear a lot about your teacher's personal life, but there was one thing we learned about Mrs. Grabowski: she had a son, he had written a book, and he was trying to get it published. Later that year he would even end up subbing long-term for one of the teachers in our school.

This was crucial for me because authors had always been somewhat mystical figures, far off in the distance. But this time it was someone in my school. I saw him in the hall. I never had him for a class, but he was unquestionably *there*. A real writer.

We read his manuscript in class and I liked it. It took place in Minnesota, a place I knew pretty well. It was about camping, which my family did a lot of. And it was about a normal family. I liked that something interesting could be written about a place I knew, about an activity I understood, and with a family I could relate to. I could do that. More and more I started to think that maybe this could be me. Maybe this could happen for me.

Epilogue

*"That's the reason they're called lessons," the Gryphon remarked:
"because they lessen from day to day."
- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

I didn't learn to believe in impossible things in one day, but it became easier throughout the year. The threat diminished a little with each passing day. I got used to the house and made new friends. That was most important. I had friends to spend time with at school and a safe place to go after. Everything else was a lot less impossible afterwards.

As a sixth grader I had been thrown into the bigger, more demanding world of middle school, without even the friends from elementary school to keep me above the surface. Like Alice, I managed to keep my head above the water and continue on the journey. In the end, I had learned that I could do it.

Sixth grade is the transition from elementary school. It's the first time many students feel like they're growing up, but despite this, they still want to be kids. Because of this, it's a very interesting time in many lives. Sometimes students are forced to grow up faster, but that isn't all students. I wanted to show what my experience was, an experience I feel many students and adults can relate to, and an area that is rarely shown in literature. Sometimes Wonderland is part of reality.

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