The Best Part

Rachel knew all the lines to the part of the Princess by heart. Mom had tested her all weekend.

"You have this," her Dad said, smiling. Even her little brother Adam clapped.

"Rachel is Pwincess."

"Princess," Dad corrected, passing Rachel the orange juice.

"Rachel Princess," Adam said. For a two year-old, that was high praise.

By audition time later at school, Rachel’s stomach felt like it was full of a swarm of bees. Her try-out was next. She stood in the hallway outside the auditorium, clearing her throat over and over again.

"Break a leg," said her best friend Destiny, as she came out through the door. "I think I bombed. My voice came out all cheerful and high. Not scary and witch-like."

"I’m sure you did fine," said Rachel. Destiny wanted to be the Evil Sorceress. She’d been practicing a raspy voice for weeks.

The school stage had never seemed so big and empty before. Mrs. Paige and Mr. Benavidez were sitting in the front row. "You can begin," said Mr. Benavidez.

Rachel stood, knees knocking together. Her throat felt like it was squeezing shut.

She took a deep breath, and began, "What? I’ve never seen this kind of flower in the palace garden!"

The words came out low and croaky. She couldn’t help it. Rachel laughed nervously. Her laughter sounded more like a cackle than the sweet, melodic giggle of Princess Lily.

"Maybe we both didn’t do as bad as we think we did," Destiny said over lunch the next day. "Mrs. Paige says she’ll post the cast list on her door at the end of the day."

Rachel dipped her soggy French fry in a puddle of ketchup, as if she could drown it.

"I’m so nervous," she admitted. "I don’t feel like eating lunch."

"Well, I can," Destiny took a bite of a carrot dipped in hummus. "Yum, carrots give you courage. Besides, who wants to be the Evil Sorceress but me? Not you my pretty," Destiny added in her cackling voice. "Look, now that I don’t need it, my voice came back."

When Mrs. Paige posted the list, a crowd of nervous fifth graders clustered at the door. Rachel swallowed hard. "I can’t look," she whispered to Destiny. "You look."

 Destiny squeezed forward to get a good look at the list.

"Is this right, Mrs. Paige?" Destiny asked.

Rachel maneuvered herself to the front. Next to ‘Princess Lily’, she read the name Destiny Johnson. Next to ‘Evil Sorceress’, she read Rachel Gold.

"I’m the Evil Sorceress?" Rachel asked with surprise. "But I didn’t read that part!"

"You two really mystified us," said Mrs. Paige. "But Mr. Benavidez and I agreed that while you read one part, your voices and acting were perfect for these roles. Destiny sounded like a sunny Princess, and you had a marvelous cackle."

"Rachel, I know you wanted to be the Princess," Destiny said. "Are you mad at me?"

"No way, my pretty." Rachel screeched to her best friend. "You’ll make a great Princess Lily."

"I hope so," said Destiny. "I think I’m going to start eating carrots at breakfast, lunch and dinner."

"Me too," said Rachel. "There is one small problem with my part, though. My little brother could barely pronounce ‘princess’, and now he has to learn how to say ‘Evil Sorceress’."
The Dog Didn’t Eat My Homework

It would not hurt, Cody thought, to take one last look at his report on Benjamin Franklin, which he was scheduled to present after lunch. He had worked hard all weekend on those four pages, and even practiced reading it aloud to his big sister, Karin.

Searching through his notebook, he realized the red folder was gone.

Cody rifled through his stack of books, trying to make no noise while Katherine was presenting her report on Thomas Edison.

"Are you okay?" whispered his friend Chelsea, who sat in the desk opposite.

"I can’t find my report. It was in my red folder. Have you seen it?" Cody muttered back.

Chelsea looked around and shook her head. "Did you leave it at home? Or on the bus?"

Cody felt a lump in his throat build. He had taken the report out and looked at it on the bus, making sure he had it. Had he set it on the seat beside him? He’d had the seat all to himself. The only person near him had been the annoying new kid, Whatshisname. If Cody had left it on the bus, it was that kid’s fault for distracting him. He’d offered Cody gum. He’d tried to show him a baseball card autographed by his favorite pitcher. He’d told Cody that he had a really great climbing tree in his backyard and invited him to come over some time to check it out. He seemed desperate to be friends. He even trailed after Cody when the bus dropped them off at school, calling, "Hey, Cody! Wait up!" Cody had pretended not to hear him and walked a little faster.

"What seems to be the problem, Cody?" asked Mrs. Schmidt. "We need to give Katherine our attention."

"Sorry, Mrs. Schmidt," Cody said. Chelsea shook her head at him.

He was sure the folder had been in his backpack. It was the first long report he had ever had to write. Mrs. Schmidt required three sources and he had been careful to cite them correctly.

As quietly as he could, Cody delved into his backpack. It contained only a few pencils rattling in the bottom.

"What can I do?" Cody asked his friends between presentations. "I can’t find my report."

"She’ll think you didn’t do it," Chelsea said, laying her own report about Frederick Douglass on her desk.

"But I did it."

"Really?" Cody’s friend Travis said with a grin. "And it just vanished? That is so lame."

"Cody...Cody..." came a loud whisper from across the room. It was Whatshisname, pointing wildly up at Mrs. Schmidt sitting at her desk. "What was this kid’s problem?" Cody ignored him.

"You could say your dog ate it," Chelsea said. "Mungo really does try to chew up your books."

When Mrs. Schmidt called on him, Cody was unable to say anything, even a lie.

He stood up and went to Mrs. Schmidt’s desk, hoping he could whisper some excuse.

"Oh, and here is your report, Cody," said Mrs. Schmidt. "Tristan Jenkins said he found it on the bus and turned it in to me. He said he tried to give it to you."

"Tristan Jenkins?" Cody said, picking up his precious red folder.

He turned and saw Whatshisname smile and wave.

"Thank you, Tristan," he said aloud. "You totally saved me!"

Cody would not be forgetting his new friend’s name again any time soon.
The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a time of widespread suffering and financial hardship. Between 1929-1939, millions of Americans lost their jobs and their savings. Without income or money, many also lost their homes.

The stock market crash in October of 1929 is commonly viewed as the start of The Great Depression. Many people had invested their money in the stock market hoping to get rich. They'd buy stocks at one price, and then sell them for more than they'd paid. For years this strategy worked. But in October of 1929, a large number of stocks from top American companies all got sold off at the same time. When people saw this, they looked at it as a sign that they better start selling off their stocks as well. Suddenly, everyone was selling and few were buying. Not only couldn't stocks be sold for a profit, they couldn't be sold for the price they'd been bought for. Investors panicked. They started selling off their stock for anything they could get. Think of it like a reverse auction. Instead of people bidding more and more for what you're selling, you're willing to accept less and less just to get it sold.

Even people who hadn't invested in the stock market began to panic. If millionaire investors could lose their fortunes, average Americans feared the money in their banks could disappear, too. People lined up to withdraw their money from their banks. But a bank isn't like a safe. Banks only keep a limited amount of the money deposited into them. The rest they invest, or loan to other people to buy things like homes and stocks. When lots of customers want to withdraw their money at the same time, the bank doesn't have enough. Banks tried to collect back the money they'd loaned. But if people had borrowed that money to buy stock, and they couldn't sell their stock, that loan couldn't get repaid. Thousands of banks lost money and went out of business. People who had their life savings in these banks never got their money.

The prices of products, from groceries to automobiles, dropped. On the surface this sounds good, because now everything is more affordable. However, when stores sell their items for less, they now have less to pay their employees. Many times, employees would either lose their jobs or take a large cut in pay. These employees then had less money to spend at other stores. They didn't have enough money to pay their bills or pay back their loans.

Daily life was a struggle for millions of Americans. Many blamed President Herbert Hoover for the country's poverty, unemployment, hunger and homelessness. In 1933, they voted out Herbert Hoover, and elected a new president: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Thousands of everyday people, including children, wrote to him and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt asking for help, and they finally got it.
Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I just wondered if you ever received a letter from a little girl like me. I am eleven years old the 24 of March. This is my fifth year in school. I think I will soon be ready for sixth Grade. I have got five perfect certificates and one gold star of honor. I have . . . a hard way of getting what education I have. But I expect to keep on trying. I have to walk two mile and a half to school through the mud. My Father is almost blind. We have no income of any form. Father has never received one cent of the money that the unemployed are supposed to get. We sure could use it. We have been told by many people that you was very kind to the poor and needy. So I thought I would ask you if you would or could send me a few things to wear. I wear size 12 year old dresses and a 14 year old coat. I am four feet and six inches tall and weigh 80 pounds. I also would like to have a pair of shoes size 3 1/2 wide width. I would be the happiest person in the world. If I would receive a package from you for my birthday. You would never miss this small amount I have asked for. My relatives helped to put President Roosevelt where he is. I don’t ask for anything fine, just serviceable.

I do hope you will fix me up a little package and mail to me at once. My friends will be surprised. Mrs. Roosevelt please don’t have this printed or broadcasted, as some of my people have radios and all take papers and I don’t want any of them to know I asked you to send me the things. But God knows I will remember you. And you surely will be rewarded. I send you my love and best wishes.
The Perfect Candidate

When Mr. Sorenson announced that the student council election would be next month, Hua heard classmates whispering her name.

"Hua will be president," said Carlos.

"Of course, she will. She's good at everything!" said Keisha, glancing at Hua.

"I don't know about that, Keisha," said Hua, blushing.

"No, Keisha's right," Carlos whispered. "You get straight A's. You're on the travel soccer team. You play violin. And you're a great dancer. I didn't even fall asleep during your recital last spring."

"You did, too. I had to nudge you awake with my elbow," teased Keisha.

"Yeah, but that wasn't during Hua's number," Carlos defended. "Anyway, my point is that anything Hua does, she does well. Plus, she gets along with everyone."

Carlos gave a quick glance to the girl seated behind Keisha, and then added in quiet whisper, "Even the oddballs." What was her name? Luanne? She was the girl who had chosen the student handbook for her non-fiction book report in English class. Only Hua had clapped.

"Face it, Hua," Keisha chimed in. "You're smart, talented, and popular. You've got everything it takes to be a great president."

"Except for the time," admitted Hua. Keeping her grades up was her first priority. She practiced violin before school, and before she went to bed, to be sure she played all the right notes during her lessons with Dr. Nashawati. Ballet was three days a week, and sometimes more. The Nutcracker was coming up, and she wanted a part. Soccer gave her pure joy. There was nothing like kicking a goal. Some days Hua fell asleep in the car after practices.

"Relax. It's not like the student council actually does anything," said Keisha.

Hua blinks in surprise at her friend. "That's not what Mr. Sorenson said. They meet twice a month. They organize school spirit week. They plan the end of year fifth grade class trip, and they're in charge of doing fundraising to pay for it."

Carlos nodded. "Remember last year? The student council ran a school store before and after school on Fridays selling pencils, notebooks, stuff like that, to raise money."

"Friday?" Hua's violin lesson with Dr. Nashawati was right after school on Fridays. Friday was the only slot he had available, and Hua had been happy to get it.

"I think I'm going to run for Treasurer," said Carlos. "You should run for Secretary, Keisha."

Keisha shook her head. "Secretary? Haven't you seen my handwriting? It's awful. I'm not a fast typist, either. Anyway, I have other election plans."

"Vice-president?" asked Carlos.

"Nope, Hua's Campaign Manager. I have a great gimmick for her posters. We'll use smelly markers!"

"A gimmick? How many posters will I have to make?" said Hua.

"No worries," smiled Keisha. "You'll win just based on popularity. The most popular candidate always wins."

"Not always," said Miss Student Handbook from the desk behind Keisha. "There have been five times in United States history when the person elected President wasn't the candidate who got the most votes. It has to do with the Electoral College—"

"Well, I'm sure that's not true," interrupted Keisha. "Besides, who cares about what happens in college. We're in elementary school."

"Yeah, Luanne," said Carlos.

"My name's not Luanne. It's Leanne...and I like facts, and politics and I'm free on Fridays, and most other days, too. I have some great ideas for spirit week and raising money for our class. And..."

"And?" prompted Carlos.

"And I'm running for student council president, too" Leanne announced. Keisha laughed. "You? Most kids don't even know your name. You'll never win. Not with Hua running against you."

"I'm just as qualified as she is," said Leanne. "The voters will decide."

Hua had a decision of her own to make, and she needed to make it now.
The Birthday Horse

Every year, Jodie asked for the same thing for her birthday. “All I want is a horse.”

“Sweetie, it’s not negotiable,” Dad said. “Do you see any horses in our complex? Anyone with a pony in their garage?”

“Well, of course he couldn’t live here,” said Jodie. “I know we live in an urban area. But people board them for you in the country.”

“Wouldn’t you like a hamster?” said Mom.

“You can’t ride a hamster,” said Jodie, sniffling.

“Horses eat more than I do,” volunteered her older brother Ray.

“If they need the veterinarian, that’s another expense,” Dad said. “We can’t afford a horse.”

In her bedroom, Jodie picked up her black horse toy. A whole display shelf in her room was decorated with her private herd. Toys were not enough anymore. She wanted to pet a horse’s nose, comb his mane and climb on his strong back. When the doorbell rang, Jodie set the horse back on the shelf. Her guests for her sleepover birthday party had begun to arrive.

“What I’d really like is a horse, but I’ve quit wishing.” Jodie told her friends, after she blew out the candles.

Her best friend Mia gave her a hug. “I know. No room in the city for horses is there?”

Mia was as horse crazy as Jodie.

“At least you get to see horses sometimes,” Jodie said. “At your Uncle Dan’s farm.”

“And the best part is that he just added a horse rescue, which means...”

Jodie interrupted. “Which means there’s people who abandon their horses when I’ve wanted one my whole life. It’s not fair.”

Later that night, Jodie spotted Mia whispering to her parents. Her mom was smiling and her dad was nodding.

“What was that all about?” Jodie asked her best friend.

“Oh nothing. We were just discussing my birthday present for you.”

“Really? What is it?” asked Jodie, curious.

“It’s...” Mia hesitated. “A surprise.”

The next morning, everyone’s parents came to pick up their daughter, except for Mia’s.

“Get out of your PJs and into your jeans. We’re going to the country,” said Dad. “And Mia’s coming with us.”

“Can I drive?” asked Ray.

“Maybe on the way home.” Mom handed Ray a camera bag. “I was hoping you’d take some pictures today.”

They left the city behind, and took a narrow country road. At last, Dad pulled up at a gate. The big wooden sign over the gate read “Willowbook Farm and Horse Rescue.” Mia got out and typed in a code. The gate swung open. Ray snapped a photo of Jodie’s astonished face.

“Welcome to my Uncle Dan’s farm,” smiled Mia.

The pastures were full of horses. Jodie spotted chestnuts, roans, and greys but a gleaming ebony stallion caught her eye.

“You got me a horse? Jodie squealed. “But how?”

“For a monthly donation, you can ‘adopt’ a rescue horse. The first couple of months are on me, and your parents agreed to pay for the rest. Happy Birthday!” Mia exclaimed.

“We’ll take you to see the horse on weekends. If you brush and groom him, and help clean out his stable, Mia’s uncle will teach you to ride,” said Mia’s dad.

“Jodie, meet Thunder,” said Uncle Dan, leading a horse to her. He was the beautiful black steed she had admired. “My niece Mia tells me you love black horses.”

“Yes, sir!” said Jodie.

Mia’s Uncle Dan helped her up, and Ray took pictures. Although Thunder might not officially belong to Jodie, he would belong in her heart forever.
The Komodo Dragon

In the early 1900s, pearl fisherman reported seeing giant reptilian creatures on a remote chain of islands in the Indian Ocean. They believed they’d seen fire-breathing dragons. People dismissed their dragon stories as fanciful tales. It wasn’t until 1926, when scientists visited the islands themselves, that the existence of these large reptiles was proven true. Today, this animal is known as the Komodo dragon.

Komodo is one of over 17,000 islands that make up the country of Indonesia. Komodo dragons are only found on five of these islands, including Komodo. They don’t exist in the wild anywhere else in the world.

Komodo dragons aren’t actually dragons, but they are the largest living lizard on Earth. The average male Komodo dragon weighs 200 pounds. Females are slightly smaller. Males can grow up to 10 feet long. If it’s hard to picture how long that is, realize that a standard basketball hoop is 10 feet high. As reptiles, they are cold-blooded and have scaly skin.

Komodo dragons are carnivorous predators. They use their long, forked yellow tongue the same way a snake does. Their tongue “smells” the air to help them find food. They can locate prey and carrion, or dead animal carcass, from more than 2 miles away. (Remember those fisherman who claimed they’d seen fire-breathing dragons? Likely, they’d mistaken the Komodo dragon’s flicking tongue for a wisp of fire.) The Komodo dragon hunts with stealth. It hides in bushes and tall grass, then pounces on its prey, delivering a lethal bite.

What makes the Komodo dragon’s bite so deadly? For years, it was widely believed that the Komodo dragon’s saliva oozed with toxic bacteria. The bite of the Komodo dragon infected its prey with bacteria. But when scientists analyzed samples of Komodo dragon saliva, they found it to be pretty ordinary. The bacteria in their saliva wasn’t any different from the saliva of other predators. However, researchers discovered venom glands in the Komodo dragon’s mouth. These findings offer a competing theory on how Komodo dragons kill. Their sharp, jagged teeth tear into prey causing a serious wound. Their bite also releases venom into the animal. The venom prevents blood from clotting, meaning blood flows rapidly from the wound without stopping. Small animals die from blood loss. Sometimes, larger prey, like deer and water buffalo, escape the initial attack. But their gaping wound becomes infected, and the animal weakens and dies.

Komodo dragons aren’t very finicky eaters. When feasting on prey, they’ll eat almost the entire animal, including hooves, bones, and internal organs. They can consume 80% of their body weight in a single meal. Komodo dragons can survive on only 12 meals a year.

Even though Komodo dragons are fearsome predators, they still need our protection. There are less than 5,000 Komodo dragons left in the world. When humans hunt them, or take over their habitat with buildings or roads, we threaten their survival.
The Big Catch

Reuben had never gone fishing without Grandpa before. At the Boy Scout Fishing Derby, no adults could help. The Scout Masters weighed the fish, took down the measurements, and took a picture for proof. Then fish were released back into the lake. On the judges’ table, two trophies gleamed like golden beacons. There was a prize for catching the biggest fish, and a prize for catching the most fish.

The competitors baited their hooks. Reuben had splurged on live crawfish. At $2 each, his purchase had eaten up all of his savings, but Reuben believed it was worth it. There was no better catfish magnet than crawfish. At least that’s what Reuben had read on the Internet. Plus, he had the fancy new reel that Grandpa had just bought him for his birthday. Reuben felt sure it would give him the Midas Touch when it came to fishing, except he hoped to catch more than puny goldfish.

“Hey, Troy. Has anyone ever won both trophies?” Reuben asked the senior scout next to him.

“Nope,” Troy’s fishing reel looked shabby, and it had duct tape on it. Reuben couldn’t see what Troy was using as bait, but it smelled like a sweat sock that had stepped in something you wouldn’t want to eat.

“So you fish much? I fish all the time,” said Reuben.

“Sometimes,” said Troy. “Want some chewing gum?”

“No, thanks,” said Reuben.

“Start fishing!” said the Scoutmaster.

The hot sun peeked out of the clouds. Reuben had only had two nibbles in an hour, but neither had stayed on his hook as he tried to reel them in. He had heard splashing and shouts of joy from other scouts along the lake’s edge. Someone was catching something, just not him.

“I once caught a catfish as fierce as a wildcat,” Reuben told Troy “I swear, it growled at me.”

“Um hum,” said Troy. He was pulling in something, very slowly.

Reuben put a fresh crawfish on his hook. “One time, with Grandpa, I caught 39 fish in a single day.”

Troy’s eyes and attention were glued on his own line.

“Um, I mean 59 fish, maybe more. I lost count. All I know is our cooler was heavier than an elephant stuck in cement.” Reuben cast his line back out into the lake. “I’m a fishing wizard.”

“Uh huh,” Troy reached for his net.

“Got a little something there, do you?” asked Reuben.

“Your line is wiggling,” said Troy, pointing to the lake.

Sure enough, Reuben had a bite. “I knew it! Crawfish, works like magic.”

Reuben began frantically reeling in his catch. “This is going to be a monster,” he shouted. “Feels like I’m pulling in a whale.”

Scouts turned to look his way.

“It's giving me a fight!” Reuben pulled hard. “But I’m not losing tug-o-war to some fish!”

There was some splashing around Troy, but Reuben focused on his own line. He could hear applause as he pulled his fish out of the water.

“Must be feisty for its size,” said the Scoutmaster, coming up behind Reuben. “Good size perch. Maybe eight inches long?”

Reuben looked over his fish with pride. Then he saw the fish Troy was holding up for the Scoutmaster to examine.

It was an enormous catfish, as big as the small shark Grandpa had caught in the ocean.

“That will be the biggest catch of the day, I’m thinking,” said the Scoutmaster. “Now that’s a monster. What did you use for bait?”

“Bubble gum and moldy cheese,” said Troy.

“Have you ever seen such a big catfish, Reuben?” the scoutmaster asked.

For once, Reuben said nothing at all. Troy’s catfish had stolen his tongue.
The Miller, His Son, and the Donkey
An Aesop's Fable

One day, a long time ago, an old Miller and his son were on their way to market with a donkey which they hoped to sell. They led the donkey by a rope, very slowly, for they thought they would have a better chance to sell him if they kept him in good condition. As they walked along the highway some travelers laughed loudly at them.

"What foolishness," cried one, "to walk when they have the means to ride. Perhaps the donkey has more brains in his head than they do."

The Miller did not like to be thought a fool, so he told his son to climb up and ride. They had gone a little farther along the road, when three merchants passed by.

"What disrespect!" cried one of the merchants. "Have you not heard that the young should honor their elders? Get down, and let the old man ride."

Though the Miller was not tired, he made the boy get down and climbed up himself to ride, just to please the merchants.

Around the next bend, they came upon some women carrying baskets of vegetables.

"What selfishness," exclaimed one of the women as she pointed to the Miller. "He sits perched on the donkey, while that poor boy has to walk."

The Miller, not wanting to be thought ill of, told his son to climb up onto the donkey behind him.

They had no sooner started out again than a loud shout went up from another company of people on the road.

"What a crime," cried one, "to load up that poor animal like that! They look more able to carry the poor creature, than he to carry them."

"Certainly, they are on their way to the nearby market to sell the poor thing," said another. "They don't care about the animal, just the money they'll be paid for him."

The Miller and his son quickly scrambled down, and devised a new plan.

The Miller, his son and the donkey caused an uproar as they entered the market a short time later. Merchants and shoppers alike were astonished to see the Miller and his son carrying the donkey, tied at its hooves from a pole. A great crowd gathered around them to get closer look at the strange sight.

The donkey did not dislike being carried, but so many people came up to point at him and laugh and shout, that he began to kick and bray. Then, just as they were crossing a bridge, the ropes that held him gave way, and down the donkey tumbled into the river.

The poor Miller now set out sadly for home. By trying to please everybody, he had pleased nobody, and had nothing to show for his efforts but empty pockets.