

Papa's Parrot - by Cynthia Rylant

Though his father was fat and merely owned a candy and nut shop, Harry Tillian liked his papa. Harry stopped liking candy and nuts when he was around seven, but, in spite of this, he and Mr. Tillian had remained friends and were still friends the year Harry turned twelve.

For years, after school, Harry had always stopped in to see his father at work. Many of Harry's friends stopped there, too, to spend a few cents choosing penny candy from the giant bins or to sample Mr. Tillian's latest batch of roasted peanuts. Mr. Tillian looked forward to seeing his son and his son's friends every day. He liked the company.

When Harry entered junior high school, though, he didn't come by the candy and nut shop as often. Nor did his friends. They were older and they had more spending money. They went to a burger place. They played video games. They shopped for records. None of them were much interested in candy and nuts anymore.

A new group of children came to Mr. Tillian's shop now. But not Harry Tillian and his friends.

The year Harry turned twelve was also the year Mr. Tillian got a parrot. He went to a pet store one day and bought one for more money than he could really afford. He brought the parrot to his shop, set its cage near the sign for maple clusters, and named it Rocky.

Harry thought this was the strangest thing his father had ever done, and he told him so, but Mr. Tillian just ignored him.

Rocky was good company for Mr. Tillian. When business was slow, Mr. Tillian would turn on a small color television he had sitting in a corner, and he and Rocky would watch the soap operas. Rocky liked to scream when the romantic music came on, and Mr. Tillian would yell at him to shut up, but they seemed to enjoy themselves.

The more Mr. Tillian grew to like his parrot, and the more he talked to it instead of to people, the more embarrassed Harry became. Harry would stroll past the shop, on his way somewhere else, and he'd take a quick look inside to see what his dad was doing. Mr. Tillian was always talking to the bird. So Harry kept walking.

At home things were different. Harry and his father joked with each other at the dinner table as they always had – Mr. Tillian teasing Harry about his smelly socks; Harry teasing Mr. Tillian about his blubbery stomach. At home things seemed all right.

But one day, Mr. Tillian became ill. He had been at work, unpacking boxes of caramels, when he had grabbed his chest and fallen over on top of the candy. A customer had found him, and he was taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

Mr. Tillian couldn't leave the hospital. He lay in bed, tubes in his arms, and he worried about his shop. New shipments of candy and nuts would be arriving. Rocky would be hungry. Who would take care of things? Harry said he would. Harry told his father that he would go to the store every day after school and unpack boxes. He would sort out all the candy and nuts. He would even feed Rocky.

So, the next morning, while Mr. Tillian lay in his hospital bed, Harry took the shop key to school with him. After school he left his friends and walked to the empty shop alone. In all the days of his life, Harry had never seen the shop closed after school. Harry didn't even remember what the CLOSED sign looked like. The key stuck in the lock three times, and inside he had to search all the walls for the light switch.

The shop was as his father had left it. Even the caramels were still spilled on the floor. Harry bent down and picked them up one by one, dropping them back in the boxes. The bird in its cage watched him silently. Harry opened the new boxes his father hadn't got to. Peppermints. Jawbreakers. Toffee creams, Strawberry kisses. Harry traveled from bin to bin, putting the candies where they belonged.

"Hello!"

Harry jumped, spilling a box of jawbreakers.

"Hello, Rocky!"

Harry stared at the parrot. He had forgotten it was there. The bird had been so quiet, and Harry had been thinking of the candy.

"Hello," Harry said.

"Hello, Rocky!" answered the parrot.

Harry walked slowly over to the cage. The parrot's food cup was empty. Its water was dirty. The bottom of the cage was a mess.

Harry carried the cage into the back room.

"Hello, Rocky!"

"Is that all you can say, you dumb bird?" Harry mumbled. The bird said nothing else.

Harry cleaned the bottom of the cage, refilling the food and water cups, and then put the cage back in its place and resumed sorting the candy.

"Where's Harry?"

Harry looked up.

“Where’s Harry?”

Harry stared at the parrot.

“Where’s Harry?”

Chills ran down Harry’s back. What could the bird mean? It was something from “The Twilight Zone.”

“Where’s Harry?”

Harry swallowed and said, “I’m here, I’m here, you stupid bird.”

“You stupid bird!” said the parrot.

Well, at least he’s got one thing strait, thought Harry.

“Miss him! Miss him! Where’s Harry? You stupid bird!”

Harry stood with a handful of peppermints.

“What?” he asked.

“Where’s Harry?” said the parrot.

“I’m *here*, you stupid bird! I’m here!” Harry yelled. He threw the peppermints at the cage, and the bird screamed and clung to its perch.

Harry sobbed, “I’m here.” The tears were coming.

Harry leaned over the glass counter.

“Papa.” Harry buried his face in his arms.

“Where’s Harry?” repeated the bird.

Harry signed and wiped his face on his sleeve. He watched the parrot. He understood now: someone has been saying, for a long time, “Where’s Harry? Miss him.”

Harry finished his unpacking and then swept the floor of the shop. He checked the furnace and so the bird wouldn’t get cold. Then he left to go visit his papa.

Slower Than the Rest

By: Cynthia Rylant

Leo was the first one to spot the turtle, so he was the one who got to keep it. They had all been in the car, driving up Tyler Mountain to church, when Leo shouted, "There's a turtle!" and everyone's head jerked with the stop.

Leo's father grumbled something about turtle soup, but Leo's mother was sympathetic toward turtles, so Leo was allowed to pick it up off the highway and bring it home. Both his little sisters squealed when the animal stuck its ugly head out to look at them, and they thought its claws horrifying, but Leo loved it from the start. He named it Charlie.

The dogs at Leo's house had always belonged more to Leo's father than to anyone else, and the cat thought she belonged to no one but herself, so Leo was grateful for a pet of his own. He settled Charlie in a cardboard box, threw in some lettuce and radishes, and declared himself a happy boy.

Leo adored Charlie, and the turtle was hugged and kissed as if he were a baby. Leo liked to fit Charlie's shell on his shoulder under his left ear, just as one might carry a cat, and Charlie would poke his head into Leo's neck now and then to keep them both entertained.

Leo was ten years old the year he found Charlie. He hadn't many friends because he was slower than the rest. That was the way his father said it: "Slower than the rest." Leo was slow in reading, slow in numbers, slow in understanding nearly everything that passed before him in a classroom. As a result, in fourth grade Leo had been separated from the rest of his classmates and placed in a room with other children who were as slow as he. Leo thought he would never get over it. He saw no way to be happy after that.

But Charlie took care of Leo's happiness, and he did it by being congenial. Charlie was the friendliest turtle anyone had ever seen. The turtle's head was always stretched out, moving left to right, trying to see what was in the world. His front and back legs moved as though he were swimming frantically in a deep sea to save himself, when all that was happening was that someone was holding him in midair. Put Charlie down and he would sniff at the air a moment, then take off as if no one had ever told him how slow he was supposed to be.

Every day, Leo came home from school, took Charlie to the backyard to let him explore and told him about the things that had happened in fifth grade. Leo wasn't sure how old Charlie was, and, though he guessed Charlie was probably a young turtle, the lines around Charlie's forehead and eyes and the clamp of his mouth made Leo think Charlie was wise the way old people are wise. So Leo talked to him privately every day.

Then one day Leo decided to take Charlie to school.

It was Prevent Forest Fires week and the whole school was making posters, watching nature films, imitating Smokey the Bear. Each member of Leo's class was assigned to give a report on Friday dealing with forests. So Leo brought Charlie.

Leo carried the box to his classroom and placed it on the wide windowsill near the radiator and beside the geraniums. His teacher called attendance and the day began.

In the middle of the morning, the forest reports began. One girl held up a poster board pasted with pictures of raccoons, and squirrels, rabbits and deer, and she explained that animals died in forest fires. The pictures were too small for anyone to see from his desk. Leo was bored.

One boy stood up and mumbled something about burnt-up trees. Then another got up and said if there were no forests, then his dad couldn't go hunting, and Leo couldn't see the connection in that at all.

Finally it was his turn. He quietly walked over to the windowsill and picked up the box. He set it on the teacher's desk.

"When somebody throws a match into a forest," Leo began, "he is a murderer. He kills trees and birds and animals. Some animals, like deer, are fast runners and they might escape. But other animals"-he lifted the cover off the box-"have no hope. They are too slow. They will die." He lifted Charlie out of the box. "It isn't fair," he said, as the class gasped and giggled at what they saw. "It isn't fair for the slow ones."

Leo said much more. Mostly he talked about Charlie, explained what turtles were like, the things they enjoyed, and what talents they possessed. He talked about Charlie the turtle and Charlie the friend, and what he said and how he said it made everyone in the class love turtles and hate forest fires. Leo's teacher had tears in her eyes.

That afternoon, the whole school assembled in the gymnasium to bring the special week to a close. A ranger in uniform made a speech,

then someone dressed up like Smokey the Bear danced with two others dressed like squirrels. Leo sat with his box and wondered if he should laugh at the dancers with everyone else. He didn't feel like it.

Finally, the school principal stood up and began a long talk. Leo's thoughts drifted off. He thought about being home, lying in this bed and drawing pictures, while Charlie hobbled all about the room.

He did not hear when someone whispered his name. Then he jumped when he heard, "Leo! It's you!" in his ear. The boy next to him was pushing him, making him get up.

"What?" Leo asked, looking around in confusion.

"You won!" they were all saying. "Go on!"

Leo was pushed onto the floor. He saw the principal smiling at him, beckoning to him across the room. Leo's legs moved like Charlie's-quickly and forward.

Leo carried the box tightly against his chest. He shook the principal's hand. He put down the box to accept the award plaque being handed to him. It was for his presentation with Charlie. Leo had won an award for the first time in his life, and as he shook the principal's hand and blushed and said his thank-yous, he thought his heart would explode with happiness.

That night, alone in his room, holding Charlie on his shoulder, Leo felt proud. And for the first time in a long time, Leo felt *fast*.

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The Marble Champ

by Gary Soto

1 Lupe Medrano, a shy girl who spoke in whispers, was the school's spelling bee champion, winner of the reading contest at the public library three summers in a row, blue ribbon awardee in the science fair, the top student at her piano recital, and the playground grand champion in chess. She was a straight-A student and—not counting kindergarten, when she had been stung by a wasp—never missed one day of elementary school. She had received a small trophy for this honor and had been congratulated by the mayor.

2 But though Lupe had a razor-sharp mind, she could not make her body, no matter how much she tried, run as fast as the other girls'. She begged her body to move faster, but could never beat anyone in the fifty-yard dash.

3 The truth was that Lupe was no good in sports. She could not catch a pop-up or figure out in which direction to kick the soccer ball. One time she kicked the ball at her own goal and scored a point for the other team. She was no good at baseball or basketball either, and even had a hard time making a hula hoop stay on her hips.

4 It wasn't until last year, when she was eleven years old, that she learned how to ride a bike. And even then she had to use training wheels. She could walk in the swimming pool but couldn't swim, and chanced roller skating only when her father held her hand.

5 "I'll never be good at sports," she fumed one rainy day as she lay on her bed gazing at the shelf her father had made to hold her awards. "I wish I could win something, anything, even marbles."

6 At the word "marbles," she sat up. "That's it. Maybe I could be good at playing marbles." She hopped out of bed and rummaged through the closet until she found a can full of her brother's marbles. She poured the rich glass treasure on her bed and picked five of the most beautiful marbles.

7 She smoothed her bedspread and practiced shooting, softly at first so that her aim would be accurate. The marble rolled from her thumb and clicked against the targeted marble. But the target wouldn't budge. She tried again and again. Her aim became accurate, but the power from her thumb made the marble move only an inch or two. Then she realized that the bedspread was slowing the marbles. She also had to admit that her thumb was weaker than the neck of a newborn chick.

8 She looked out the window. The rain was letting up, but the ground was too muddy to play. She sat cross-legged on the bed, rolling her five marbles between her palms. Yes, she thought, I could play marbles, and marbles is a sport. At that moment she realized that she had only two weeks to practice. The playground championship, the same one her brother had entered the previous year, was coming up. She had a lot to do.

9 To strengthen her wrists, she decided to do twenty push-ups on her fingertips, five at a time. “One, two, three . . .” she groaned. By the end of the first set she was breathing hard, and her muscles burned from exhaustion. She did one more set and decided that was enough push-ups for the first day.

10 She squeezed a rubber eraser one hundred times, hoping it would strengthen her thumb. This seemed to work because the next day her thumb was sore. She could hardly hold a marble in her hand, let alone send it flying with power. So Lupe rested that day and listened to her brother, who gave her tips on how to shoot: get low, aim with one eye, and place one knuckle on the ground.

11 “Think ‘eye and thumb’—and let it rip!” he said.

12 After school the next day she left her homework in her backpack and practiced three hours straight, taking time only to eat a candy bar for energy. With a popsicle stick, she drew an odd-shaped circle and tossed in four marbles. She used her shooter, a milky agate with hypnotic swirls, to blast them. Her thumb *had* become stronger.

13 After practice, she squeezed the eraser for an hour. She ate dinner with her left hand to spare her shooting hand and said nothing to her parents about her dreams of athletic glory.

14 Practice, practice, practice. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Lupe got better and beat her brother and Alfonso, a neighbor kid who was supposed to be a champ.

15 “Man, she’s bad!” Alfonso said. “She can beat the other girls for sure. I think.”

16 The weeks passed quickly. Lupe worked so hard that one day, while she was drying dishes, her mother asked why her thumb was swollen.

17 “It’s muscle,” Lupe explained. “I’ve been practicing for the marbles championship.”

18 “You, honey?” Her mother knew Lupe was no good at sports.

19 “Yeah. I beat Alfonso, and he’s pretty good.”

20 That night, over dinner, Mrs. Medrano said, “Honey, you should see Lupe’s thumb.”

21 “Huh?” Mr. Medrano said, wiping his mouth and looking at his daughter.

22 “Show your father.”

23 “Do I have to?” an embarrassed Lupe asked.

24 “Go on, show your father.”

25 Reluctantly, Lupe raised her hand and flexed her thumb. You could see the muscle.

26 The father put down his fork and asked, “What happened?”

27 “Dad, I’ve been working out. I’ve been squeezing an eraser.”

28 “Why?”

29 “I’m going to enter the marbles championship.”

30 Her father looked at her mother and then back at his daughter. “When is it, honey?”

31 “This Saturday. Can you come?”

32 The father had been planning to play racquetball with a friend Saturday, but he said he would be there. He knew his daughter thought she was no good at sports and he wanted to encourage her. He even rigged some lights in the backyard so she could practice after dark. He squatted with one knee on the ground, entranced by the sight of his daughter easily beating her brother.

33 The day of the championship began with a cold blustery sky. The sun was a silvery light behind slate clouds.

34 “I hope it clears up,” her father said, rubbing his hands together as he returned from getting the newspaper. They ate breakfast, paced nervously around the house waiting for 10:00 to arrive, and walked the two blocks to the playground (though Mr. Medrano wanted to drive so Lupe wouldn’t get tired). She signed up and was assigned her first match on baseball diamond number three.

35 Lupe, walking between her brother and her father, shook from the cold, not nerves. She took off her mittens, and everyone stared at her thumb. Someone asked, “How can you play with a broken thumb?” Lupe smiled and said nothing.

36 She beat her first opponent easily, and felt sorry for the girl because she didn’t have anyone to cheer for her. Except for her sack of marbles, she was all alone. Lupe invited the girl, whose name was Rachel, to stay with them. She smiled and said, “OK.” The four of them walked to a card table in the middle of the outfield, where Lupe was assigned another opponent.

37 She also beat this girl, a fifth-grader named Yolanda, and asked her to join their group. They proceeded to more matches and more wins, and soon there was a crowd of people following Lupe to the finals to play a girl in a baseball cap. This girl seemed dead serious. She never even looked at Lupe.

38 “I don’t know, Dad, she looks tough.”

39 Rachel hugged Lupe and said, “Go get her.”

40 “You can do it,” her father encouraged. “Just think of the marbles, not the girl, and let your thumb do the work.”

41 The other girl broke first and earned one marble. She missed her next shot, and Lupe, one eye closed, her thumb quivering with energy, blasted two marbles out of the circle but missed her next shot. Her opponent earned two more before missing. She stamped her foot and said “Shoot!” The score was three to two in favor of Miss Baseball Cap.

42 The referee stopped the game. “Back up, please, give them room,” he shouted. Onlookers had gathered too tightly around the players.

43 Lupe then earned three marbles and was set to get her fourth when a gust of wind blew dust in her eyes and she missed badly. Her opponent quickly scored two marbles, tying the game, and moved ahead six to five on a lucky shot. Then she missed, and Lupe, whose eyes felt scratchy when she blinked, relied on instinct and thumb muscle to score the tying point. It was now six to six, with only three marbles left. Lupe blew her nose and studied the angles. She dropped to one knee, steadied her hand, and shot so hard she cracked two marbles from the circle. She was the winner!

44 “I did it!” Lupe said under her breath. She rose from her knees, which hurt from bending all day, and hugged her father. He hugged her back and smiled.

45 Everyone clapped, except Miss Baseball Cap, who made a face and stared at the ground. Lupe told her she was a great player, and they shook hands. A newspaper photographer took pictures of the two girls standing shoulder-to-shoulder, with Lupe holding the bigger trophy.

46 Lupe then played the winner of the boys' division, and after a poor start beat him eleven to four. She blasted the marbles, shattering one into sparkling slivers of glass. Her opponent looked on glumly as Lupe did what she did best—win!

47 The head referee and the President of the Fresno Marble Association stood with Lupe as she displayed her trophies for the newspaper photographer. Lupe shook hands with everyone, including a dog who had come over to see what the commotion was all about.

48 That night, the family went out for pizza and set the two trophies on the table for everyone in the restaurant to see. People came up to congratulate Lupe, and she felt a little embarrassed, but her father said the trophies belonged there.

49 Back home, in the privacy of her bedroom, she placed the trophies on her shelf and was happy. She had always earned honors because of her brains, but winning in sports was a new experience. She thanked her tired thumb. "You did it, thumb. You made me champion." As its reward, Lupe went to the bathroom, filled the bathroom sink with warm water, and let her thumb swim and splash as it pleased. Then she climbed into bed and drifted into a hard-won sleep.

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Birthday Box

by Jane Yolen

I was ten years old when my mother died. Ten years old on that very day. Still she gave me a party of sorts. Sick as she was, Mama had seen to it, organizing it at the hospital. She made sure the doctors and nurses all brought me presents. We were good friends with them all by that time, because Mama had been in the hospital for so long. The head nurse, V. Louise Higgins (I never did know what that V stood for), gave me a little box, which was sort of funny because she was the biggest of all the nurses there. I mean she was tremendous. And she was the only one who insisted on wearing all white. Mama had called her the great white shark when she was first admitted, only not to V. Louise's face.

"All those needles," Mama had said. "Like teeth."

But V. Louise was sweet, not shark-like at all, and she'd been so gentle with Mama. I opened the little present first. It was a fountain pen, a real one, not a fake one like you get at Kmart.

"Now you can write beautiful stories, Katie," V. Louise said to me. I didn't say that stories come out of your head, not out of a pen. That wouldn't have been polite, and Mama—even sick—was real big on politeness.

"Thanks, V. Louise," I said.

The Stardust Twins—which is what Mama called Patty and Tracey-Lynn because they reminded her of dancers in an old-fashioned ballroom—gave me a present together. It was a diary and had a picture of a little girl in pink, reading in a garden swing. A little young for me, a little too cute. I mean, I read Stephen King and want to write like him. But as Mama always reminded me whenever Daddy finally remembered to send me something, it was the thought that counted, not the actual gift.

"It's great," I told them. "I'll write in it with my new pen." And I wrote my name on the first page just to show them I meant it. They hugged me and winked at Mama. She tried to wink back but was just too tired and shut both her eyes instead.

Lily, who is from Jamaica, had baked me some sweet bread. Mary Margaret gave me a gold cross, blessed by the pope, which I put on even though Mama and I weren't churchgoers. That was Dad's thing.

Then Dr. Dann, the intern who was on days, and Dr. Pucci, the oncologist

(which is the fancy name for a cancer doctor), gave me a big box filled to the top with little presents, each wrapped up individually. All things they knew I'd love—paperback books and writing paper and erasers with funny animal heads and colored paper clips and a rubber stamp that printed FROM KATIE'S DESK and other stuff. They must have raided a stationery store. There was one box, though, they held out till the end. It was about the size of a large top hat. The paper was deep blue and covered with stars; not fake stars but real stars, I mean, like a map of the night sky. The ribbon was two shades of blue with silver threads running through. There was no name on the card.

“Who's it from?” I asked.

None of the nurses answered, and the doctors both suddenly were studying the ceiling tiles with the kind of intensity they usually saved for x-rays. No one spoke. In fact the only sound for the longest time was Mama's breathing machine going in and out and in and out. It was a harsh, horrible, insistent sound, and usually I talked and talked to cover up the noise. But I was waiting for someone to tell me.

At last V. Louise said, “It's from your mama, Katie. She told us what she wanted. And where to get it.”

I turned and looked at Mama then, and her eyes were open again. Funny, but sickness had made her even more beautiful than good health had. Her skin was like that old paper, the kind they used to write on with quill pens, and stretched out over her bones so she looked like a model. Her eyes, which had been a deep, brilliant blue, were now like the fall sky, bleached and softened. She was like a faded photograph of herself. She smiled a very small smile at me. I knew it was an effort.

“It's you,” she mouthed.

I read her lips. I had gotten real good at that. I thought she meant it was a present for me. “Of course it is,” I said cheerfully. I had gotten good at that, too, being cheerful when I didn't feel like it. “Of course it is.”

I took the paper off the box carefully, not tearing it but folding it into a tidy packet. I twisted the ribbons around my hand and then put them on the pillow by her hand. It made the stark white hospital bed look almost festive. Under the wrapping, the box was beautiful itself. It was made of a heavy cardboard and covered with a linen material that had a pattern of cloud-filled skies.

“It's empty,” I said. “Is this a joke?” I turned to ask Mama, but she was gone. I mean, her body was there, but she wasn't. It was as if she was as empty as the box. Dr. Pucci leaned over her and listened with a stethoscope, then almost absently patted Mama's head. Then, with infinite care, V. Louise closed Mama's

eyes, ran her hand across Mama's cheek, and turned off the breathing machine.

"Mama!" I cried. And to the nurses and doctors, I screamed, "Do something!" And because the room had suddenly become so silent, my voice echoed back at me. "Mama, do something."

I cried steadily for, I think, a week. Then I cried at night for a couple of months. And then for about a year I cried at anniversaries, like Mama's birthday or mine, at Thanksgiving, on Mother's Day. I stopped writing. I stopped reading except for school assignments. I was pretty mean to my half brothers and totally rotten to my stepmother and Dad. I felt empty and angry, and they all left me pretty much alone.

And then one night, right after my first birthday without Mama, I woke up remembering how she had said, "It's you." Now, Mama had been a high school English teacher and a writer herself. She'd had poems published in little magazines. She didn't use words carelessly. In the end she could hardly use any words at all. So—I asked myself in that dark room—why had she said, "It's you"? Why were they the very last words she had ever said to me, forced out with her last breath?

I turned on the bedside light and got out of bed. The room was full of shadows, not all of them real. Pulling the desk chair over to my closet, I climbed up and felt along the top shelf, and against the back wall, there was the birthday box, just where I had thrown it the day I had moved in with my dad.

I pulled it down and opened it. It was as empty as the day I had put it away. "It's you," I whispered to the box. And then suddenly I knew. Mama had meant that *I* was the box, solid and sturdy, maybe even beautiful or at least interesting on the outside. But I had to fill up the box to make it all it could be. And I had to fill me up as well. She had guessed what might happen to me, had told me in a subtle way. In the two words she could manage.

I stopped crying and got some paper out of the desk drawer. I got out my fountain pen. I started writing, and I haven't stopped since. The first thing I wrote was about that birthday. I put it in the box, and pretty soon that box was overflowing with stories. And poems. And memories.

And so was I. And so was I.

The Wednesday Surprise

By Eve Bunting

I like surprises. But the one Grandma and I are planning for Dad's birthday is the best surprise of all.

We work on it Wednesday nights. On Wednesdays Mom has to stay late at the office and my brother, Sam, goes to basketball practice at the Y. That's when Grandma rides the bus across town to stay with me.

I watch for her from the window and I blow on the glass to make breath pictures while I wait. When I see her I call: "Sam! She's here!" and he says it's okay to run down, down the long stairs and wait by the door.

"Grandma!" I call.

"Anna!" She's hurrying, her big, cloth bag bumping against her legs.

We meet and hug. She tells me how much I've grown since last week and I tell her how much she's grown, too, which is our joke. Between us we carry her lumpy bag upstairs.

I show Grandma my breath picture, if it's still there. Mostly she knows what it is. Mostly she's the only one who does.

On Wednesday nights we have hot dogs.

"Have you heard from your dad?" Grandma asks Sam.

"He'll be back Saturday, same as always," Sam says. "In time for his birthday."

"His birthday?" Grandma raises her eyebrows as if she'd forgotten all about that. Grandma is some actress!

When Sam goes she and I do the dishes. Then we get down to business.

I sit beside her on the couch and she takes the first picture book from the bag. We read the story together, out loud, and when we finish one book we start a second.

We read for an hour, get some ice cream, then read some more.

Grandma gives me another hug. "Only seven years old and smart as paint already!"

I'm pleased. "They're all going to be so surprised on Saturday," I say.

When Sam comes home we play card games, and when Mom comes home she plays, too.

"You'll be here for the birthday dinner?" Mom asks as Grandma is getting ready to leave.

"Oh yes, the birthday," Grandma says vaguely, as if she'd forgotten again. As if we hadn't been working on our special surprise for weeks and weeks. Grandma is tricky.

"I'll be here," she says.

Sam walks Grandma to the bus stop. As they're going down the stairs I hear him say: "What have you got in this bag, Grandma? Bricks?"

That makes me smile.

Dad comes home Saturday morning, and we rush at him with our *Happy Birthdays*. He has brought Sam a basketball magazine and me a pebble, smooth and speckled as an egg, for my rock collection.

"I found it in the desert, close to the truck stop," he says. "It was half covered with sand."

I hold it, imagining I can still feel the desert sun hot inside it. How long did it lie there? What kind of rock is it?

Dad has stopped to pick wildflowers for Mom. They're wilting and she runs to put them in water. Then Dad has to go to bed because he has been driving his big truck all through the night.

While Dad sleeps, Sam and I hang red and blue streamers in the living room. We help Mom frost the cake. We've made Dad's favorite dinner, pot roast, and our gifts are wrapped and ready.

I watch for Grandma and help carry the bag upstairs. Wow! Sam should feel how heavy it is now! Grandma has brought a ton of books. We hide the bag behind the couch. I am sick from being nervous.

Grandma usually has seconds but tonight she doesn't. I don't either. I can tell Mom is worried about the pot roast but Grandma tells her it's very good.

"Are you feeling well, Mama?" Dad asks Grandma. "How are your knees?"

"Fine. Fine. The knees are fine."

Dad blows out the birthday candles and we give him his gifts. Then Grandma shoots a glance in my direction and I go for the big bag and drag it across to the table. I settle it on the floor between us.

"Another present?" Dad asks.

"It's a special surprise for your birthday, Dad, from Grandma and me."

My heart's beating awfully fast as I unzip the bag and give the first book to Grandma. It's called *Popcorn*. I squeeze Grandma's hand and she stands and begins to read.

Mom and Dad and Sam are all astonished.

Dad jumps up and says, "What's this?" but Mom shushes him and pulls him back down.

Grandma has the floor. She finishes *Popcorn*, which takes quite a while, gives the book back to me and beams all over her face.

"My goodness!" Mom is beaming too. "When did this wonderful thing happen? When did you learn to read?"

"Anna taught me," Grandma says.

"On Wednesday nights," I add. "And she took the books home, and practiced."

"You were always telling me to go to classes, classes, classes," Grandma says to Dad. She looks at Mom. "You must learn to read, you say. So? I come to Anna."

I giggle because I am so excited.

Grandma reads and acts out *The Easter Pig*. And *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

"It's much smarter if you learn to read when you're young," she tells Sam sternly. "The chance may pass along with the years."

Sam looks hurt. "But I *can* read, Grandma."

"Nevertheless." She takes out another book.

"Are you going to read everything in that bag, Mama?" Dad asks her. He's grinning, but his eyes are brimming over with tears and he and Mom are holding hands across the table.

"Maybe I will read everything in the world now that I've started," Grandma says in a stuck-up way. "I've got time." She winks at me.

"So, Anna? What do you think? Was it a good surprise?"

I run to her and she puts her cheek against mine. "The best ever," I say.

The Memory String

By: Eve Bunting

Laura sat under the oak tree in their small back yard. Whiskers, her black-and-white cat, lay beside her, twitching his tail. On the porch her dad and her new stepmother, Jane, were painting the railings.

Jane stopped and pushed her hair away from her face. She wore an old, paint-stained shirt and skinny-leg jeans.

"Want some lemonade?" she called.

Laura shook her head. While Jane was still looking in her direction, she took the memory string from the red velvet box on her lap. The buttons strung on the string shone and silvered, patterned with oak-leaf shadows.

Jane dipped her brush in the paint and went back to work. Her shoulders were stiff. Laura had pulled out this string a lot in front of her stepmother.

"This was my great-grandmother's memory string," Laura told Whiskers in a loud voice. "Then it was my grandmother's, then my mother's, and now it's mine."

"Are you sure you don't want some lemonade?" her dad called.

"No thanks," Laura said.

"If you're not doing anything important, you might come and help us." Jane's voice was sharp.

"I **am** doing something important," Laura said.

"This button came off my great-grandmother's first grown-up dress," she told Whiskers. "Back then some people couldn't read, or keep diaries, so a string like this was their way to remember. Mom told me."

Whiskers yawned.

"This button was my great-aunt's. She wore the dress to a quilting party. It's all part of our family's history."

Whiskers got up to leave, but Laura took a firm grip under his stomach and crushed him against her, leaving her arms free.

"Yowww!" Whiskers warned.

"Be quiet," Laura whispered. "I can't talk about my memory string to myself, can I? You have to stay here."

"These three buttons were from second cousins of my grandma's. The cousins were at a spelling bee." She peered up under her bangs. Dad was pouring lemonade. He took a frosted glass to Jane, and she sat back on her heels and smiled at him.

Laura saw him touch Jane's neck, under her hair. He did that often. Sometimes Dad and Jane sat on the porch at night after Laura had gone to

bed. Her room was above, and she'd hear them whispering and laughing softly. They seemed so happy. It hurt to hear them happy like that.

She rubbed the buttons between her fingers. Get to the good parts, she thought. Forget the cousins. Get to Mom.

"This button came from Mom's prom dress," she told Whiskers. "Stop squirming," she added. "And this is from her wedding dress. It was white, of course.

"And see this teeny tiny one? This is off my christening dress, and this one is off the dress I wore to my fifth birthday party. I remember."

She stopped for breath and glanced up again at Jane. All this must hurt her a lot. For an instant Laura felt mean and horrible. But only for an instant. She didn't HATE Jane. Not really. It was just that Jane had gone and married Dad.

She had to rush now, because Dad was coming down the front steps. "This khaki one was off Dad's uniform when he went to war in a place called the Gulf. Mom cut it off his jacket when he came home, and she cried and cried because she was so happy he was safe."

Dad stood in front of her, bare ankles, old torn tennis shoes. "Laura...?"

Quickly before he could stop her, Laura said, "This last one fastened the neck of Mom's nightgown, the one she was wearing when she died. Dad saved it for me." She held up the memory string. It turned, the colors blurring through the tears in her eyes.

Whiskers leapt.

"Watch it!" Dad said anxiously. But he was too late.

Whiskers' claws caught on the string, scattering buttons like sunflower seeds.

Laura covered her eyes with her hands. "Oh, no!"

Up on the porch, Jane dropped the paintbrush and rushed down the steps. "It's okay, sweetie," she said. "We'll find them."

The three of them searched the grass.

"I've found one," Dad said.

"Here's another," Jane called.

Whiskers watched from the top of the sagging fence.

"Bad Whiskers!" One by one Laura put the buttons carefully back in the box. "There were forty-three," she said. "I'm still missing seven."

They found six more. Their knees were covered with dirt. Ants crawled over their hands and arms.

They sifted through the leaves and dead blossoms that had blown off the camellia bushes by the porch. "Do you know which one is still missing?" Jane asked.

"The one from Dad's uniform. It was Mom's favorite, because... because..."

Tears streamed down Laura's face, and Jane took a step toward her. "Oh, Laura, my dear."

It was what Mom would have said. What Mom would have done. Jane's voice was soft, as Mom's would have been. But this wasn't Mom. Mom had died three years ago. This was Jane.

"Dad?" Laura whispered, and her dad folded her against him.

They searched again after supper until the light faded while Whiskers lay on the porch, lazily swatting bugs.

When she finally went to bed, Laura couldn't sleep.

"We'll find the button in the morning," Dad had promised.

"And I'll help you restring them," Jane said.

"Thanks. But I know how to do it," Laura told her.

She lay, listening to the crickets, listening to Whiskers purring beside her.

A little later she heard the murmur of porch voices, and she got out of bed and knelt by the window.

Jane and Dad sat in the swing. She could hear its soft creak. Bugs batted against the yellow light bulb.

"But there won't be any difference," Dad was saying. "My old uniform is in one of those boxes we stored in the attic. I can cut a button off and drop it in the grass. She'll never know."

"How can you think of such a thing?" Jane asked. "Those are true moments on that string. You can't cheat Laura like that."

"But sweetheart." Laura imagined Dad taking off his baseball cap, rubbing his head the way he did when he was worried. "My little girl's heart is breaking. I only want to make her feel better."

"Laura would rather have that button missing than have a replacement," Jane said. And then she added, "It's like a mother. No substitute allowed."

Laura heard the chokiness in Jane's voice. She felt choked up herself.

The swing squeaked as one of them stood up. "Let's look some more. Right now," Jane said.

"Now? You can't see a thing."

"Flashlights," Jane said.

Laura bit her lip. Should she go, too? But then they'd know she'd heard.

She watched the white circles of the flashlights, the dark figures of Jane and Dad crawling through the grass. She could smell the fresh paint. The crickets had stopped singing to listen.

And then she heard Jane's excited voice. "I found it. Over here! It must have rolled." She held something between her finger and thumb.

"Whoopee!" Dad swung Jane round and round and Jane laughed. "Careful! We don't want to lose it again!"

"She'll be so happy! You can give it to her at breakfast, Janie."

"I don't think so," Jane said, "She won't like it that I'm the one who found it. Let's just leave it on the porch. Like a gift from a good fairy."

Laura got slowly back into bed. Whiskers had moved into her warm place, and she slid him over.

"Grrr!" he warned.

She lay, thinking. Jane's sad voice saying: "It's like a mother. No substitute allowed." She remembered the soft look on Jane's face today. The way she had understood about the true moments on the string.

So much to think about. So much.