

My Second Half

A Young Adult's Novel About Growing Up

By: Bethany Holley

I dedicate my first novel to my family with love—You have filled my notebook with memories that I will treasure for a lifetime.

Chapter one: Midnight Chatter

Growing up, no matter what pace you take it at, is inevitable—for most people, that is. I learned the first piece of information, not the second, from my cousin five years my minor. However, every morning when I awake, I still strive to revive my childhood with the assistance of a very dear friend of mine who continues to hold every insight into the world of youth. Although I have been acquainted with “my second half,” as I like to call her, for many, many years, it was not until only recently, following the conclusion of my high school years, that I realized the importance of my ability to hold onto the past. Jody has molded me into the young lady that I am today and that I will be for the rest of my life, and I have full confidence that she will remain with me for the remainder of my days. Despite the fact that I will never be able to turn back time, she has rewarded me with a secret passage back to my childhood regardless of the many instances in which I have turned her away. Jody is not like any of my other friends who have faded with the years, because for this individual, adulthood never came.

“Mackenzie! Mackenzie, the movie is ready! Do you want any popcorn?
Mackenzie, where are you?”

“Just a minute, Mom! Just give me one more second!”

“Jody, I cannot believe I’ve been out of school for over a month now. I wish the summer would last forever. It is completely not fair that the fun things go by too quickly. It’s a shame that vacation is already over. We didn’t have very long to talk on the trip,

and we're not even going to the beach this year. I used to hate the long drives to Florida, but now that you come with us, I never get bored. "

"Yeah. If you think the school year is bad, try being me. I get so lonely when you go off for seven hours and then leave for all of your activities after you get home and finish your homework. I wish you would write to me even when you're not on summer break."

"Well, I guess I could do that..... I just never thought of it before. Hey, but aren't you in a choir or ballet or Girl Scouts or something back at your house? You shouldn't be too bored."

"I'm in all the same things you're in, remember? We made that promise when we became friends two years ago to stay connected by participating in similar hobbies in our own towns even though we can't actually be together when we go to them. I do think it would be better, though, if we stayed in touch. That way, what we're doing would seem more realistic."

"I see what you mean. Every year, I get so excited about you coming to stay with us, but I won't let myself send you a letter, because I am afraid that will spoil how wonderful our time together will be. Right now, my thoughts do appear rather silly."

"O.K. So that settles it. You'll write to me as much as you can after I go home in August? I want to hear all about your choir, ballet, and Girl Scouts, and I will promise to tell you all about mine, too."

"I'll try my best. The school year is so busy, and I barely have time to go to all of my activities. I still think it's kind of silly, though, to tell you about normal, everyday

things like Girl Scouts. I mean, I enjoy making flower pot animals and everything, or I wouldn't be in it, but why do you want to hear about it?"

"You're growing up quickly, Mackenzie, and this won't last forever. You've got to find ways to hold onto the memories of what you are doing now so that you don't forget. Yeah, I mean Girl Scouts may not seem like such a big deal now, but you'll miss it when it's gone."

"I don't really understand why you're so worried about me growing up, Jody, since it's so far off and everything. But, since you're my best friend, I promise to write more often."

"Good. Now let's go start that movie before your mom goes crazy. I think she is starting to regret that she offered to let me stay here that weekend two summers ago when my Aunt Nancy and Uncle Doug had to go to a conference. Now, I don't even sleep at my relatives' house when I'm here for two whole months."

"Sure. We'll watch our favorite one. I haven't seen it for almost a month now!"

"Mackenzie?"

"Yes, Jody?"

"Can I go to church camp with you next week?"

"Of course you can! I'll introduce you to my friend who lives down the street. I always enjoy talking to her, so don't get jealous, though. But I know that we'll be the only ones up early every morning, so we'll have plenty of time to chat. I wouldn't want you to be left out of my very first week away from my parents."

Jody's not like my other friends. Her innocence leads her to believe that true friendship never falters, and since we both agree that each one of us is the best companion anyone could have, she continues to cling to me without ceasing. While I understand that even the best of friends need vacations away from one another to stabilize the peace, Jody insists that the two of us are united forever and nothing can pull us apart. Our relationship puzzles me, because not once during our first summer together did we quarrel or wish to be spending time with someone else. As my own childlike behaviors fade away, it dawns on me that she was constantly striving to put herself into all the roles that please me, while I gladly pulled her along for the ride. As time slips away, we do occasionally find ourselves in arguments and predicaments, but I am usually the one who is doing the arguing as she listens to my fighting words and searches for a way to settle our dispute.

I have often attempted to introduce Jody to my circle of friends at school and in my neighborhood, but she adamantly refuses my offer. Don't get me wrong, though. She is not the kind of individual who houses feelings of jealousy when I choose to spend time with others instead of her. If I decide to attend a sleepover or go see a movie with a buddy of mine, she joyously agrees that it is marvelous how I have branched out and met new people.

"Sara has asked me to spend the night at her house tonight. We're going to rent that new movie about the president's kid getting into trouble and do makeovers. Are you sure you don't want to come? Sara and I always talk about our dreams before we go to sleep, and I know that's the kind of thing you love to do."

“No. Not this time. Or ever, for that matter. Don’t you understand how special our friendship is? It wouldn’t be the same if we shared our thoughts with others. But don’t worry about me. You go ahead and have fun with Sara, and I am completely content here at your house thinking about our conversation from last night.”

Chapter two: Summer Blues

Weekends during the school year and summer afternoons in Sherwood are often sluggish for preteens, especially when the weather throws temper tantrums. After viewing the token five movies showing in the theater two times each, all within one week’s time, my friends and I must wait out the never-ending days preceding the new releases. Following our day-long “movie campouts” on Main Street, we usually wind up playing phone tag and trading houses for “hanging out.” Sometimes, though, I decline their offers and stay home with Jody to escape all the gossip.

It is on an occasion such as this, and the August humidity is giving everyone a shower who dares to step outside. Jody and I lay sideways on my bed, our feet swinging hysterically up and down in the air as we flip through my old chapter books, chuckling while passing around funny phrases. The phone rings twice before I jump up and speed down the hall, racing the answering machine and sighing with relief when I grab a hold of the receiver before the fifth ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mackenzie!”

“Oh hi, Caroline! What’s up?”

“Sara and I are over at her house hanging out. Want to come over? Melanie might be over here later, too. What have you been doing?”

“Oh not much. Just taking it easy in my room.”

“So, do you want to come over?”

“Not today, but thanks. I need some time to myself.”

“I wonder about you sometimes, Mackenzie Hilary. What do you do at home by yourself all the time? I know your parents are out shopping for cars today, and your brother is *always* on those pointless video games. What does a person do by themselves, anyway?”

I smile and shake my head, winking at Jody as she holds back a disapproving glare. She’ll never understand how my companions can become so attached to each other. She thinks they’re incapable of accomplishing anything by themselves.

“I’m fine, Caroline, really. Don’t worry about me. I might come over tomorrow or something.”

“Are you sure? You must be lonely. Do you have a new friend over there? A *boyfriend*, maybe? You can tell me. I won’t tattle.”

“No, Caroline. No new friends. See you tomorrow. Bye.”

“Bye, Mackenzie.”

“Now where were we, Jody?”

“Thanks for not telling her about me.”

“No problem.”

“It will always be between you and me. No one else would understand. Believe me, it’s better this way. I’d like to stay my unique self. I don’t need everyone trying to change the way I am. The same goes for you, too. Don’t ever forget how important it is to be your own person, Mackenzie.”

Chapter three: Musical Madness

I am currently experiencing another band camp. We left last Friday and arrived in Anthony, West Virginia at Greenbrier Youth Camp, beginning a hard-working week. Every morning I awake to the sound of strained buglers at 7:00 A.M. for the Drum Major and Generals to take attendance. This year, my squad leader is Carson Lockner, and a friend of mine, Mattie Farn, a junior, is in the group with my brother Cal and me. Despite the fact that I am with people that brighten my day, I do not believe that anything could possibly put a smile on my face when the early morning sun taunts me as I go through the tortuous ritual of forever reaching for toes on the damp pavement. (I am sure that I must grow a half inch every year when band starts up for the summer. Either that, or my arms shrink. I am beginning to think that it is my arms that alter their length, however, since everyone else seems to always gain additional authority in the clouds while I remain at the same level I have experienced for almost four years.) Before this, nevertheless, is the portion of the day that further wears a callous spot on my heart whenever I think of it. Laps. Oh, don’t get me wrong; I love to get out and enjoy the crisp breezes of a new day and watch the sun play games of hide-and-go-seek with the clouds until the brighter competitor wins, pushing the more subtle element out of the blueberry Kool-aid sky. In fact, I could probably easily endure the over-grown star’s

adoration of sending out its squad crew of extra rays later in the afternoon if it wasn't for the humiliation of having to jog until a fast-paced walker can pass by me with no effort at all. I live and breathe for the opportunity to take my dog out for walks off of the normal route, through the nonchalant wildflowers and untamed grass that have escaped from their human nannies and governesses, living like a plant's Huck Finn. Nature exists for humans' enjoyment, not for a path on which to drain energy. Why should I go out and run every morning if all it does is remind me of how much I despise the world of sports? I mean, seriously! I am the girl, for heaven's sake, who insists on cruising casually down the country highways on my brother's Play Station 2 car racing game so that I am able to take in all of the scenery! Why would I want to ruin a perfectly gorgeous day outdoors in the real world by battling with my inability to break my last middle school record on the mile?

Anyway, I must pull myself away from my homemade controversial forensics piece and continue with the rest of my week at band camp. Luckily, I have short breaks after my demonstration of my lifetime failure in athletics when the new participants called "Rookies" line up prior to breakfast in order to sing pointless songs such as Spongebob Squarepants, Rubber Ducky, and Butter Beans. Some wave their arms around wildly, their faces gleaming like recently polished computer monitors. Others painstakingly move their limbs, acting as if moving too quickly would cause them to fall off and litter the yellowing grass. Last year, I was forced to be apart of this fiasco, which I still fail to comprehend completely.

Afterwards, the band files in like starving puppy dogs by grades in order to receive a well-deserved breakfast. Although it is quite aggravating having to work on an

empty stomach, I always feel as if I have something waiting for me at the end of the hardship, causing me to appreciate it all the more.

Why do parents always say it is good to go through tough times? I mean, I do realize that it makes the good experiences seem ten times more enjoyable, but can't I still breathe in the glory that comes with the simplicity of life without battling monsters along the way? I am not a hard person to please. As long as I can spend a Saturday afternoon playing a board game with my family or taking the dog for a walk, I am completely content. All I ask for is the chance to rest and go to bed at a fairly decent hour of the night after a long day of school. It's not like I take anything for granted. Even if my family never went on a single vacation, I would be as pleased as a hyper puppy in a room full of stuffed animals if I could merely sit in my room with the stereo on low and write in my journal. If I had never been on any out-of-town trips, I would assume that was normal and be content with my life. It's not like I sleep in until noon everyday and then sit on the couch for all hours gazing at the big, black box of entertainment. When I am not at band, I do not waste my summer.

Following the short-lived break in the early-morning of each day, my fellow members and I prepare to tackle the dreaded hot, three-hour morning practices that unfortunately have turned numerous prospective horn players away from this arena of music. *If the factor of heat was gone, these sessions would actually be a rather inviting game.* However, much to my surprise, these rehearsals are actually lots of fun and go by really fast. The older members turn these early mornings and afternoons into a circus, hollering a language that must originate on another planet, and dancing hysterically from

one spot on the field to another like monkeys after climbing into a ten gallon barrel of chocolate bars.

Why do they act like this? Don't they care that people are looking at them? Oh well. I am relieved that they bring a significant measure of amusement to this activity. Although I would never act as they do, their behavior does bring me a great deal of pleasure. Every now and then, I allow a small smile to poke through my exhausted lips when I lay my horn down, but I wouldn't want anyone to think that I am overly enjoying myself. I am supposed to be the person who shies away from any kind of wild or unusual conduct, the girl who keeps everyone else in line.

Each day as I pace with leaden feet off of the abused field, I feel like I have learned something that I will not merely store away in my “shelves of encyclopedias,” but that I will remove from my bedside table every morning after waking and use to search for answers to questions that confront me out in the real world. By 12:30, the most difficult part of the day is over.

Unlike the ritualistic mornings, the afternoons are often open to the band director's ideas. While on some days the band marches by sections on the field, later scattering into smaller groups consisting of specific instruments, on others, the entire time prior to break is spent with further torturing of the over-used grassy area that probably sits quietly the entire year until the Pride of Sherwood decides to make its presence known.

I am overly thrilled to announce that this year, I am the mellophone section leader! Last season, my additional two horn comrades were seniors, and since they have now graduated, I am in charge after only one year of experience. Being the oldest, I am

actually able to lead my own sectionals! *Do they think I am capable of this position? I feel so daft when my fellow section peers ask me questions and I have no idea how to answer.* Since it is extremely difficult to stay on the correct pitches on the varying high and low notes on the mellophone, I aid them with finding the correct notes. We also do a lot of memorizing using the technique of playing eight to ten measures at a time, each of us trying to memorize on our own, then playing the memorized measures without music together. *Why can't I remember the music I have practiced for what appears to be all of my spare time? I am definitely not cut out for this musical stuff. They must think that I do not memorize anything, just because I have to relearn everything this week. I was able to play the whole show. Honest. I was so proud of myself for actually almost resembling a real leader. A leader. Who am I kidding? I am not anything like a leader. Once I find myself near a Fleet, General, or even a Squad Leader, I resume my typical position of inferiority and run to accomplish whatever the individual asks of me, constantly searching for approval and orders for what to do next. I lose all of my belief that any of my ideas are worth even a dime.*

Later, we play entire sections of the piece as a group while attempting to hide the pieces of paper holding the answer key to the performance that we would alter and perfect for the following five months. *It is probably because of me that we must continue to play everything over and over.*

Taylor Leon, an eighthman, is one of the Rookies and plays the mellophone. She is one of the four students who will be in marching band but will only be in the eighth grade at the middle school when the members' time in the classroom must initiate. The other student in my section is Boone Oliver who will be a freshman. This individual

did not begin band until last year, and he did not pick up a mellophone until only recently since he started his musical career with the trumpet.

Following sectional time is free time! On most of the days, I spent the break merely securing myself a spot in one of the showers and resting on my bed. Tuesday, however, adds a little bit of spice to everyone's week with the annual band camp fashion show. This definitely does not follow the normal stereotype of beautiful young ladies displaying their senses of style. Instead, the Rookie boys dress up like girls (skirts, make-up, bras and all). The announcer is the drum major, and he alters his image in this manner as well. Afterwards, all of the male participants still hold traces of glitter and lipstick on their faces! *I will never understand high school students. I still don't accept the fact that I am one.*

Everyone's favorite part of the day comes when we line up for dinner in the early evening, because before filing into the cafeteria, we receive the packages and letters that our family and friends have prepared for us in order to make the week a little more bearable. I received my mom's homemade melt-in-your-mouth sugar cookies one day and even a letter from my Grandnana and Grandpop in Florida and a miss-you card from my Westie Kirby. Everyday, of course, I have been bombarded with notes from Jody. She is very angry with me and depressed because I would not let her come with me to camp, and she is definitely letting me know that. I don't understand why she desires so much to be apart of this experience. I mean, she has gone with me every year on my church youth group's week-long retreat, and we've had a blast. Why does she beg to get up early, work hard all day, and go to bed late every night for an entire week when no one is making her? It's insane! I need all the rest I can scrounge for, and I have no time

to spend my few moments for relaxation discussing my feelings on occurrences here with her. I have promised that I will tell her all about my week when I arrive back in Sherwood, but she is still relentless.

At night, the band learns field drill for the show from about 6:30 until 10:30 P.M. and stays awake even longer as a result of a “Circle Talk” in which the members voice their opinions about the day, creating their very own version of Oprah. I am usually unable to hit the sack until after midnight during my week at band camp. *Can't I just have enough time to regain my energy? How am I supposed to function?*

Wednesday, the parents come to watch us perform. However, instead of the band unveiling all of our work in a “Parent’s Show,” we practice while they watch. In the end, we actually only reveal the drum solo portion as a result of the band’s inability to recall the beginning of the show, which we have not touched since the beginning of the never-ending week.

Chapter four: Bowling Balls and Candles

I am now a changed person, because I am Sweet Sixteen! I don’t feel any different, but my birthday, January tenth, sure did come in with a bang this year.

This is probably the most awesome birthday I have had in my life (with all kidding aside)! The day before my birthday, I woke up to flour-like layers on the ground and up in the trees, nagging the sleepy branches. Friday itself wasn’t that great of a day, but at least I finished a lot of my projects and schoolwork so that I am able to relax on my birthday. That night I was able to cool down and watch a movie while enjoying my

family's "Snack Night" tradition in which we munch on crackers, dip, and other treats that my mom prepares for dinner as we view the visual experience.

Saturday, January tenth, I have surrendered my day to fun, which I do not do very often now that I am in high school. I have planned to go to the bowling alley with my mom, dad, Cal, and Jody, who is visiting for the weekend, and then choose a restaurant for dinner tonight. For the entire day, I am allowed to schedule everything based on my preferences. However, I have now discovered that all of this has changed completely. Something else, something *even bigger* is in store for me on my special day.

After about thirty boring minutes of watching a much younger newborn me continuously sleeping on home movies that consistently terminate with my mom chasing my dad away with dishpans as he confronts her with his camera in the kitchen, Jody, my dad, Cal, and I have decided to play a quick game as my mom skims through one of my old photo albums. Here I am, sitting on the floor in the family room, enjoying the relaxation, when I hear a scuffling at the front door.

That silly dog! I don't understand why it bothers him so much when other dogs pass by our house. He always thinks he is so big and bad and never realizes that most of the dogs he yells insults at could eat him up in one gulp. I wonder what he says to the neighbors' pets. They probably laugh at his efforts to provoke them.

I go back to playing cards as my mom sluggishly gets up to go shut the front door so Kirby will halt his incessant yapping, and I look up to see something I had never expected. Out of the blue, as if she'd come out of thin air, my cousin Paige appears in the doorway of the room and starts walking toward me! How weird is that?!

Why is she here? How did she get here?

A few seconds later, my Uncle Bryce and Aunt Tammy and my other cousin Bailey enter the area teeming with excitement and confusion. They all wish me happy birthday, and I find out that everyone but me has known they were coming, but they have kept it a secret. I don't think I have ever been surprised like that before. I have always been on the other end, surprising someone else. I had not even considered the possibility of having a surprise such as this on my sixteenth birthday.

Am I really sixteen? I have always reserved this age to characters on television or in books. I once believed people this age were all grown-up. Wasn't Sleeping Beauty sixteen when she pricked her finger on a spindle? I had always thought she was an adult.

As all of my unexpected guests dodge one another in the crowded kitchen, contemplating which food items to sample for lunch, the door bell rings. My dad goes to answer the door, only to ask in a very perplexed manner, "You're not supposed to be here, are you?" Aunt Tammy puts down the cheese she is feeding to Bailey and poses the question with the unknown answer, "Who is that?"

Suddenly, through the dining room and into the kitchen come my Grandnana and Grandpop! They have just completed our family's annual Christmas gathering in Hilton Head, driven home to Florida, and then traveled all the way to Sherwood, Virginia in about a week's time! No one had known they were coming.

By now, I am in a mode of silent disbelief, and so much is happening that my mind is completely and utterly blank. I cannot possibly take it all in, and I feel as if I am up in a cloud or in a dreamland. Come to think of it, I don't really know how to explain my sentiments at all. I stand here, speechless, and it hasn't really hit me yet that everyone is here for me and me alone.

Evidently, though, I am not allowed even a few moments to process the questions sweeping through my boggled mind before another piece of information confuses me further. As I am adding variety to my plate by throwing on a few extra potato chips, Grandnana asks, “So when is Kayla getting here?” Nonchalantly, without a thought to what she is saying, mom says, “Around one o’clock. I thought it would be easier if we all ate in shifts.”

Am I in a dream? I must be. Nothing like this ever happens in real life, because I am Mackenzie, the girl who never has anything exciting or amazing happen to her. Come to think of it, though, even my dreams aren’t spectacular. I mean, who spends their sleeping hours picking up potatoes that fall out of their mouths like loose teeth? If my mind wanders back to what my dad had for his birthday dinner while I am supposed to be experiencing out-of-this-world moments, like sky diving, swimming with the dolphins, or talking with my favorite movie star, then I must have the most boring life possible. Well, I have dreamt about an actor that I adore, but even in that fantasy, he drove away before I could get his autograph, much less before we were able to talk. I wonder if famous people live normal lives when they are not acting. Do they sit down with their families on Saturday nights and watch rented movies? It must be strange to watch yourself.

I stare blankly at Dad, and he shifts a baffled glare at Mom. “She didn’t know that did she?” he asks, referring to my knowledge that my mom’s younger sister and her entire family are also adding to the merriment of the day. This is how I come to know that *everyone* is celebrating my birthday with me, and turning sixteen is a much bigger deal than I had ever imagined.

After the arrival of the Fosters and the confirmation of the grand scale of this birthday festivity, everyone piles into the vans to fulfill my original plan for the day, bowling.

Now that the three of my cousins whom I have spent so many occasions with over my lifetime have joined the events of the day, it seems as if I cannot get any closer to heaven while standing on earth as I am right at the present time. Cassidy, the next grandchild following Cal, is eleven and holds wisdom far beyond her years. Becoming a big sister at the age of six, she has long surrendered many of the elements holding together the majority of every little girl's hopes, dreams, and passions. While she gave away her Barbie dolls at the age of seven, I, on the other hand, have just forced myself to pack mine away about a year or so ago. As I continue to dress and decorate my dolls in outfits for each season and event of the year, she has already begun a stereo and music collection that I did not even contemplate until my seventh grade year. Realizing that I should not be holding onto such childish accessories, I often become angry with her wish to grow up so quickly. In the end, however, as a result of her quickening maturity, I have attained a lifetime companion that I could not have discovered anywhere else. My cousin and I have found so much in common, because it is almost as if we are on the same level and turned to the identical page in the book of existence. With her, I am not afraid to voice my deepest secrets and most daring ambitions, fragile antiques that I would never show to any of my friends (none of my friends but Jody, that is). On late nights during our visits, we sit awake and play hot potato with our dilemmas and resolutions until we have reestablished our relationship that has grown lukewarm over the past few months that we have been unable to chat.

Harrison, the next Foster, is almost ten now and also a huge part of my childhood memories. Although he is no longer the toddler that I “adopted” in elementary school to watch over and assist, he still shows a sense of respect to all of those around him and is not the typical boy (except when it comes to his sisters). He does not mind including himself in the activities of his cousins and is fairly good-natured about the fact that the majority of his child and adolescent relatives are girls.

The last and much unexpected Foster child is Lacey, a bubbly five-year-old who defines prissy and little girl. Smothered with the love and attention of her older siblings and cousins, she thrives from the laughter and concern of others and is never off of Broadway. She is constantly shedding her clothes in order to replace them with more stylish and fashionable frilly skirts and shoes with lace, sequins, and every other imaginable embellishment, earning herself the title “the Little Princess.” As if to compensate for her sister’s premature lost interest in the little girl aspects of life, she dedicates her time to all the varying sizes of the replicas representing a young girl’s prototype of “the perfect lady.”

At the bowling alley, I share my lane with Cal, Cassidy, and Harrison. Jody has decided to look on from the sidelines and take everything in, explaining that it will take two of us to remember all the details of the day. I insist that she participate, but when she continues to refuse, I am relieved that she will be able to relay the perfect, little facets of the next few hours to me that I will surely miss in the excitement. Dad, Uncle Bryce, Mom’s older brother Fuller, and Aunt Kayla and her husband Abner have taken their places on the lane beside of us. Lacey and Paige have their very own row. Everyone is playing two games, except for Paige and Lacey who have grown tired of the heavy ball

after only one frame into the ordeal. Cassidy, as a result, has ended up managing her game and theirs, sliding on the polished floor as she rushes back and forth between the lanes, cradling her choice ball under her arm.

Those two little ones are hilarious! They are constantly dancing and sliding on their stomachs on the slippery floor, their silky hair standing up on end as if they have just visited the electric globe at the science museum.

Why can't I be that young again? They have no responsibilities holding them back from what they love to do. However, I am able to have much more freedom as a high school student than I could ever have hoped for at their age. I don't have to walk in a single file line to every class and activity, never once experiencing the hallways and classrooms without the presence of my fellow peers. Actually, come to think of it, I did have the opportunity back in my younger days to come face to face with a few empty spaces full of desks and notice details that I never had before since no one was pulling on me to shift my attention elsewhere. Back then, I enjoyed staying after school, and it brought me great joy to know that my mom was substitute teaching. I felt so special to be walking the halls "after hours" when all of the other individuals my age had long piled into the large, yellow vehicles to await the short trip back to their doorsteps. And that was a short trip, now that I think of it! I cannot believe that I even attempted to read my chapter books during the ten-minute journey home. It's a wonder I didn't miss my stop.

One-year-old Bailey is enjoying the entertainment of watching the burdensome round objects spiral down into the unknown caves of wonder as well as her older cousins as they perform their very own version of a Rockettes' show. Bryce and Tammy go to bowling alleys quite a lot, and she is hooked on it. She stares continuously as if the pins

at the end of the lanes are giant stuffed animals deprived of hugs, ready to get up and walk toward her at any moment.

For my birthday dinner, all of the crew is meeting at Clint 'n' Knobb's, a locally owned restaurant in Sherwood. As I had expected, we are having quite a productive time waiting for our food. Luckily, I have decided to bring two palm-sized decks of cards for Cal, Cassidy, and I so we can play "War." After the meal, the waiter brings out a scrumptious brownie surrounded by mountains of vanilla ice cream and pools of chocolate syrup and sings "Happy Birthday." He will not stop raving about the fact that I have chosen to spend my Sweet Sixteen with my family instead of doing something else. On the contrary, I cannot think of anything different in which I would rather partake. I always feel as if I can be myself around my family and relatives, while with my friends I remain rather reserved. I am more open with my companions than I was as a younger person, but I still do not believe in completely "letting lose" around people that are not kin to me.

At home, everyone packages themselves into the family room like a gift that is too large for the cardboard box, and we begin the glorious ritual of opening presents. Mom and Dad have given me an outfit and my very first cell phone, and Cal has chosen a stuffed Westie as his gift to me. All of the aunts, uncles, and cousins have presented me with a palm pilot. Could my day possibly get any better than this?

Unfortunately, before I am even able to process all of the spectacular aspects of my day, it is over. Why is it that the wonderful things only remain for a very short while?

I have never regretted a birthday ending as much as I have this one. I wish it could go on forever. Nevertheless, I know that it will live on in my memory for eternity.

“Jody, are you awake?”

“Of course I’m awake! How could I not be? Even though this has been your birthday, it has been one of the best days of my life. I am not sure if I will ever be able to fall asleep.”

“As long as I live, I will never understand you, Jody. I mean, it’s like you are making an exact copy, actually, an even more adequate one, of my existence, capturing all the features that I begin to overlook as I grow older. I don’t see how you are profiting at all from the countless hours you spend trying to learn about me. You are always telling me that you enjoy being around my cousins, going on my family vacations, and attending camps with me, but I am beginning to wonder if this is still true. In the beginning, we only shared fun and games, but now you ask to be apart of the toughest parts of who I am, the parts I try hard to forget.”

Have I hurt her feelings? No. She is just as strong as ever. I feel bad for treating her this way, especially because she is always there for me, trying to keep me sane in one way or another. It just baffles me how anyone could care so much about the tiniest aspects of survival, the ones that seem utterly insignificant.

She pauses, then gently takes my hand and whispers, “Mackenzie, even if you cannot begin to comprehend why I am doing this, you must continue to hold onto these times we spend together and trust me. I want to be the link that you can always come to when you are unsure of which path to take next. Yes, there are difficult times that any

person would want to erase from his or her memory, but they are important, too. You say that you are not the individual you once were as a child, leaving behind old dreams for the world's reality. However, the decisions you make as you face life's battles reflect the young girl inside of you. Look closely, and you will see that every trial finds its way to a conclusion with the flashlight of your very own childhood beliefs. Remember that each condition has the opportunity to be a moment you will gladly hold onto for eternity when you search for the good in it."

I smile weakly. "Thanks, Jody. A million times. You're a better friend than I could have ever dreamed of if I had a thousand years to live."

"Alright. You better be getting to bed now. If I recall correctly, everyone is going to be here until lunch *today*, and you want to be awake for the last few hours before they have to go home."

I nod and drift silently into my bedroom where Cassidy is fast asleep, her dark hair spilling over the pillow on the right side of my bed. She mumbles something in her sleep and turns toward the desk, as if scolding me for staying up so late. I smile as I remember our conversation earlier as we awaited the start of the new day. *Could it possibly get any better than this?*

Chapter five: Hairspray and Sparkling lights

Anything is possible. One moment, I believe that I will never gain acceptance in the social world of high school, much less find a position before the appointed time, and the next, I am watching all of my dreams form into a reality. I still am not sure if I truly understand everything that has recently taken place.

I have been to the prom, and I have wonderful experiences to tell about! How much better can it get? Yes, on May eighth, I, Mackenzie Hilary, who thought that it was impossible that I would ever step foot in a prom, went in my sophomore year!

Two weeks and a day before the glorious event, I sit in the commons area of the school after my lunch, nodding in and out of consciousness as I attempt to read one of my books. I am not gaining much headway, however, because I am almost completely out-of-it since sleep has been a foreign concept to me this past week with band practice everyday in preparation for the annual variety show that all of the musicians prepare for a concert setting in the spring. As a result, it does not really register with me when my current squad leader and a friend of mine, Junior Carson Lockner, approaches me and asks, “Would you like to go to prom with me?”

Truth be told, I am in total shock. Hunting for the correct answer as I brush back a few stray hairs that have jumped down from my half-hearted attempt at a ponytail, I stutter, “Sure. Let me check and see if that is o.k.”

I am such a nit-whit. I have spent so many years trying to express myself with as few words as possible that I hardly know how to communicate with others. Yes, I have gotten better over the past few years, but I still sound so incompetent whenever I try to utilize words to introduce my ideas. I am so angry with myself! Why is it that everyone else I know can quickly find the perfect expressions for answering questions and sound like professionals?

Going to gym after my surprise encounter with Carson, I have a growing feeling of excitement inside that I cannot explain. Prom is an outside entity in a mysterious land

that has never touched any aspect of my survival, and I therefore persist in my belief that it is something that everyone dreams about, but that does not really exist.

After a hectic Friday night and Saturday morning of searching for a dress, shooting down store suspects like a crazed hunter the day after Thanksgiving, I find the perfect one, eliminating the majority of my pre-notions that this special dance is merely a fairytale staying alive in books and movies about the chosen group of girls that I could never hope to join.

When the day of prom finally makes its sparkling appearance, it hits me that I have not really thought about what will happen when Carson and I see each other for the first time in our formal wear after only meeting at band practice and school. We are both in shock at first, and it takes a little while for the silence to wash away and for us to realize we are talking to the same people that we see practically everyday. Eventually, I find myself under all of the glitter and perfume and learn to be myself.

It is always exciting to meet someone when looking completely different and he or she can only see the final product. Carson and I enter the front doors of the Civic Center, and at the bottom of the steps is my band director, Mr. Fulton! I cannot be sure, but I must have some kind of smile fighting its way around my lips as I watch him sitting there at his lap top collecting tickets. It excites me tremendously whenever I think about the possibility of individuals that I see everyday at school as my normal self witnessing me in a totally diverse light. Even I have never seen myself like this before!

Mr. Fulton smiles, fiddles with his moustache, and greets Carson and me, beaming as he showers me with compliments following a silent moment of astonishment, disbelief, and awe. Leaving behind a now quieter band teacher, we cross the threshold

into the extensively transformed formerly plain, concrete-floored room where I often go to concerts with my church's youth group, mill around at the countless booths overflowing with trinkets formed by the hands of traveling crafters, and return each year to watch the alligator wrestler when he stops by the city with the fair in the summer. The Sherwood Civic Center holds an innumerable amount of purposes in the small city, and it is amazing how it can so quickly alter its identity.

Today, the room's face is quite elegant, with drapes of translucent material watching over the guests like a hovering mother spying on her children, multiple ice sculptures, lighted trees, and a perfect little storybook bridge next to a pond filled with dazzling lilies.

Unfortunately, time is disappearing like a drop of spilled lemonade on the burning August pavement, and an hour has already passed with Carson and me simply walking around the room and greeting people that we know as we gaze at the decorations. Despite the fact that I thoroughly enjoyed myself at dinner in which I had felt like a spoiled princess, I am now regretting the loss of time I will have at the prom as a result of the delay of the large group while eating. By the time the seniors and their guests eloquently stroll across the Mary Poppins' passageway, enjoying the praise of kings and queens, Carson and I must begin to think about leaving this dream world that I have spent so few seconds in, causing me to feel as if it cannot possibly be a reality.

At home, I sadly discard my royal ball gown and finger the pearls of my exquisite jewelry, wondering if I will ever again have the opportunity of living out my fairy tale image of myself.

I want so badly to keep this dress on forever! I am so afraid that once I take it off, I will never be able to adorn myself like this again. Less than a month ago, I was content prettying up in an ordinary Easter Sunday dress, not even contemplating the possibility of obtaining a single piece of formal wear. I must find a reason for which to put on this eloquent costume in the future.

June 15, 2004

Dear Jody,

Why do good things always have to end? I sorely wish you could have been with me during my spectacular night at prom. I am sorry it has taken me so long to respond to your letters these past few months. I will not complain about my schedule again, because I know you find no excuse for my failure to take time off to recapture the valuable details before they fade away. Even though it has been over a month since the magnificent night, I have done my best to record as much as I can. I realize that this is somewhat pointless since you will be coming the day after tomorrow to stay for the summer, but I find that writing this allows the evening to come back to life.

Here goes nothing.....

Chapter six: Out West in the Wilderness

“We’re here, Jody! The moment we have both been awaiting for so many years!”

For once, she is silent, skimming the bright colored rocks with wide eyes and childlike innocence.

After arriving at the most gorgeous place in the world, Bryce Canyon National Park, and leaving following a minute hour-long visit on my family's trip out west four years ago, I am thrilled to say that we are now returning as apart of our "California Out West Trip." We will spend the majority of the day here, hiking and taking in every inch of the scenery. Our first stop at the park is Sunrise Point, which has just about every kind of rock structure that exists throughout spectacular Bryce, and it offers a view that winds on for eternity. It has a flat basin, a few rounded mountains that have teepees, and a rock that resembles a sinking ship. Oh, what beautiful colors! Brick house orange, carrot cake orange, and a brushed teeth white cover the rocks. At this particular spot, there also are not many trees, so it is easy to admire a lot of the canyon. It is here, at Sunrise Point, that my family will do their first hike of the day. We begin on the Queen's Garden Trail, which is 0.8 miles and then continue onto the Navajo trail, which is 1.4 miles. These two paths combined take us down into the canyon. This hike has made my tour of the park much better than I could ever have hoped for in my wildest imagination. Yes, the canyon is beautiful from the top, but I have not realized until now that it is completely spectacular from the inside as well. It is so awesome to walk right beside the castle structures and encounter their immense proportions. I chatter without ceasing about the scenery to Jody, but she shakes her head and puts a finger to my lips. For the rest of the day, we walk hand in hand, absorbing every possible feature of nature. Some beauty is better left for the heart. I am able to see caves and touch and stand on the rocks, allowing me to "get up close and personal" with nature. Some of the rock configurations are beautiful simply standing by themselves.

However, one particular point near the end of the two trails still stands out in my mind. As the Navajo path comes to a close, we approach a gorge, an opening, on the canyon floor. Two pieces, two walls of sandstone are close together here, and it is possible to peer right through the gap from where I am standing, all the way to the other side, watching the light as it shines on the ravine's surroundings. As I turn around while pausing to wonder if all that I am witnessing is real, I feel as if I am standing in a painting hanging over a fireplace mantle in a movie from the 1940s. However, once I cross out of this gorge, the view is even more breath-taking if that description is even feasible. All of the sun's energy and brightness seems to rest in this one place, lighting up the giant, natural rock carvings in front of us and creating a fire that does no damage. Its beauty hits me by surprise and leaves me frozen in the middle of the groggy Summer Utah air. Adding to this astounding display of the environment, the sky is a magnificent eye-catching, rich, Tinkerbell blue the entire morning and afternoon. I could sit here and take in the canyon scenery for forever, and I suggest, much to my family's amusement, that we even build our house right at this exact spot.

Following a picnic and a visit to the lodge for souvenirs, we drive to Rainbow Point, which has a lot more trees. I do not favor these areas as much, because they house dirty footprints on the smooth, dazzling marble bathroom floor that has recently been mopped. I do find another outlet for my excitement, however, when we go on the Bristlecone Loop Trail, which is flat and an easy path for walking and taking in all of the sites. Along the way, trunks twisted every which way cover the surrounding land, and I stop to touch the rubber leaves that distinguish the Bristlecone from the weak, child-like pine trees that litter my backyard back in Sherwood with sticky, useless needles. I adore

strolling in the cool summer air, often picking up the pace to allow the wind to tease my hair with one of its common hopscotch games. It is as if I am on a secret mission in the unknown, deep within a forest invisible from the rest of this hectic world. *I wonder what it would be like if this were one hundred years before now. Or even seventy or eighty. Back then, this beautiful place was a sanctuary for animals and plants alone, and to any human who stumbled into it, the canyon was pure adventure and uncertainty.* I often imagine when I am in a national park that I am the first one to discover the land's grandness, and no one else has ever experienced its beauty and magnificence.

Another interesting portion of my day is a trail dedicated to strange trees called "Witches' Brooms" in which a fraction of each plant has no leaves, and under the bare places are whole bushels of the green, rubbery pieces. This trail is a mile long and has lasted about forty-five minutes.

Following this expedition, my family is going to a few more overlooks so we can taste every possible morsel and crumb that nature serves to us in this breath-taking platter of land. Some of these areas are at the higher elevations, have an innumerable amount of trees, and are not very pretty to observe. Later, we pause at "Natural Bridge," which is in reality an arch. It is quite confusing that this scenery shares the same title as a tourist stop-off back in Virginia. *When the pioneers were naming places way back when it took months to travel across the country, how did they know that they were or were not using the same names? It's a wonder they did not choose the identical designations for several spots in nature, considering that many had an obsession with utilizing a rather small crock pot of specifications for people. I am so glad that not much of the populace has my*

name. If the teachers confuse me for my classmates when they often tag me as “Melissa” now, I cannot imagine what would happen if that really was my name.

Our last outlooks are Bryce, Inspiration, and Fairyland Canyon.

Bryce Point is my favorite and what has made me fall in love with the park both the last time I visited as well as during this excursion. There, detailed castles curve into a half circle, and at the very left are white structures resembling caves.

Inspiration Point is also gorgeous. It has row upon row of castles and only a few mountains. Here, the scenery is closer to the tourists and as a result appears much larger.

The last portion of the park in which I must regrettably say my goodbyes is Fairyland Point. The rocks here are a gentle, soft orange with splashes of coral pink, and with the light shining on them, they are an early morning sunrise at all hours of the day.

Chapter seven: Photographs and Newspaper clippings

I cannot believe it is the last day of my family’s beach vacation at my Grandnana and Grandpop’s condo in Florida. The beginning of the week had seemed to go by very slowly, and I remember wanting to build sandcastles and do all of the Hilary family beach traditions but also desiring to relax, constantly thinking there were many more instances within our eight beach days remaining to accomplish what I had wanted to at that moment. Now, I wish I could go back to those early hours. How time flies when I am having fun! Throughout the week, Cal and I have spent much of our time flipping

through Grandnana and Grandpop's old photo albums, some of which my mom and her two brothers and one sister prepared when they were kids. Mom wrote the descriptions, which is a job I now adore doing in my own photo albums. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to go on such a fun, relaxing vacation. I am in dreamland this week as I spend most of the day at the beach, shower and clean up at the condo, put on bright summer outfits, go out to eat at new and unique restaurants, shop at a humongous mall with some of my favorite stores, walk down to the pier for ice cream, and talk to Grandnana while flipping through pictures of past memories. I *do* enjoy sight-seeing journeys even though I am usually tired during them, because in only an allotted amount of time, Dad makes sure we see *everything*, but every-now-and-then, I need an actual vacation in which I am able to sit back and do not have to focus on time. I definitely have been blessed with an excellent family since I am able to experience both kinds of getaways.

"I could look through these photo albums for the rest of my life. It's a shame there are no home movies from when Mom was a kid that we can watch. Where is that scrapbook with newspaper clippings that Grandnana made?" I lift myself up from my horizontal position on the chalkboard green couch, tossing aside the blanket that had been covering my bathing suit body. My eyes wander to the window behind the table, only to discover the relentless raindrops as they litter upon the spotless brick sidewalk. Once again, the weather had cut short an afternoon at the beach.

"Oh come on, Mackenzie. I know you are fascinated by your mom's childhood, but you are ignoring present day. What are *your* kids going to have to look through that shows what you did while you visited here? Believe it or not, your life now is just as

interesting as hers was. Why don't we go find something to do that will be special for this decade and for you alone?"

Glaring at her, I pronounce, "I am going to find that scrapbook whether you help me or not, Jody. My search will go much quicker, though, if you lend me a hand."

Sighing, Jody leads me to a wobbly, overused closet door in the corner of the television room. She points to a thick, leather-bound volume overflowing with pieces of history creeping out from underneath the folded pages. I pull it down off the top shelf and open it to the first yellowed article: *Fuller and Alanna Richardson are the proud parents of Fuller Allen, Jr., born on September 16 in Wellsbury, West Virginia*. As I study the tiny, intricate attributes of my once infant uncle, I can't help but wonder how all of this digging into the past will aid me in becoming the person I hope someday to be.

Chapter eight: Floating in the Lake

I cannot believe it! I am on yet another excursion! I feel like I haven't been at home any this summer, but it's worth it. While I am in Sherwood, I always seem to have something, whether it's practicing my horn, planning a mellophone sectional, researching for the Gold Award, or doing housework, to do. These mini journeys allow me to have a vacation from my summer vacation. Monday, after a haircut and a game of monopoly with Cal, I found out about the opportunity to travel to Roxboro, North Carolina, where my Grandnana and Grandpop stay in their cabin every summer. For four straight days, my cousin Cassidy and I will have "girls' time out" with the cabin, lake, and our grandparents all to ourselves. This morning, the two of us have walked down to the water to cool off during the sweltering July day. We swim out next to our great uncle's

pontoon boat and float in the water, because the land drops off quickly here, causing us to not be able to feel the earth beneath us. Here, we talk, and talk, and talk. It is so nice to have nowhere to go and all the time in the world for conversation. It is times like these that help me realize why and how my mom and Grandnana were able to sit on the beach and chat everyday, never running out of tidbits to discuss.

“Did you know Eloise came to visit last weekend?”

“Yeah. My mom figured she was at your house since she didn’t call to go out to dinner or anything.”

“You are not going to believe what she did *this* time!”

Eloise is an old friend of my uncles, back from in their childhood days in the little town of Woodstock, Virginia. She has two twin brothers twelve years her elder, who trained her at a very young age how to be a boy. When they went off to college, she was left with the mindset that it would be easy to make friends, considering her older siblings had taught her everything there was to know about being a kid in upstate New York. However, soon growing to understand she could find no acceptance with the female specimen, Eloise began to join the niches of young boys in her community. In Woodstock, it was no different, and my uncles welcomed her attitude for mischief with open arms while my mom and aunt tried their best to avoid her.

These days, my relatives still struggle to comprehend her, but they gladly welcome her laughter into our family gatherings on a regular basis.

She is a giant of a woman, 6’3”, with broad shoulders and large hands. Still holding onto many aspects of her tomboy lifestyle, she wears her thick, coarse, dark

brown hair plain, just as she did back in the days when she went fishing with my uncles: straight and short, barely touching the underside of her chin. Having never married, she works relentlessly as a nurse at the hospital a few miles down the road from my house, going without a day off for days, sometimes weeks at a time. When finally allowing herself a break, she dives into her “hobby” (it seems like too much work to be a “hobby” to me) of remodeling ancient, decrepit mansions and plantation homes, calling her hired hands at all hours when she is not at the hospital. To entertain herself and my kin once and a while, she spends weekends with my Aunt Kayla or Uncle Bryce’s family. Every other week, she calls my family on a weekday to go somewhere for dinner. Although the adults adore her humor, and the younger children live for her youthful pranks and games, she has never earned a place in the priorities of teenagers. Assuming they are still pleased with her attempts to amuse them, she often harvests a garden of annoyance and dissatisfaction among this age group.

Bracing myself for whatever strange concoction Eloise has dished out this time, I turn to Cassidy and reply, “I won’t even try to guess what crazy thing she has initiated now. What has she done?”

Angrily kicking the water and wetting my arms and chest, she answers, “Well, now I know she is capable of stooping as low as it gets. She put toothpaste in my shampoo bottle! It took me hours to get that stuff out of my hair, and my mom just laughed with Eloise the whole time she was helping me. I asked Mom why Eloise acts the way she does, and Mom just said, ‘She’s just trying to put a smile on your face, honey. That’s her way of spreading joy to others. We all have unique ways for having fun.’”

Shocked, I remember all the times Eloise had tied my ponytail to the back of my chair and hidden fake insects in my shoes. I cannot believe how far she has just gone with her “harmless” little games. She must really be begging for attention, especially since she has recently lost Cal and me as recipients of her tricks.

When I remain silent to her complaints, Cassidy sternly explains, “Eloise treats me as if I am three years old! She just doesn’t understand me at all. I can’t stand her any longer!”

Taking a breath, I prepare to offer her my thoughts to alleviate the frustration within her.

“I know what you mean. Eloise doesn’t play deceptions on me anymore, but she continues to pick at me with little comments and gestures. Ever since I accidentally threw my retainer away in my napkin at a restaurant, she won’t forget my mistake. She always asks the waiter for an extra plate for my retainer so I don’t have to wrap it up in paper. She even explains my dilemma to our servers!”

“Why does she act like that?”

“I guess it’s because she is trying to find acceptance, and that is the only way she knows how.”

“Will you promise not to tell anyone about our conversation?”

“Definitely. We shouldn’t be talking like this, anyway. It’s not right. We need to be as polite as possible to her and try to make her feel welcome since she doesn’t get to see her own family much. For the time being, we’ll have to ‘suck it up’ as Cal says. Hopefully, she’ll come around soon.”

Cassidy sighs and leans her head back against her life vest, letting her toes drift up out of the water. “It’s nice we can talk like this.”

Even though she doesn’t go any further in her explanation, I understand completely what she means. Before today, I have kept all of these thoughts bottled up inside of me, never sharing my feelings in this way.

I really enjoy talking with Cassidy, and I wish that this quiet time to float and chat could last forever. Unfortunately, quite a few times, nature begins to interrupt us. The moment I become comfortable, tiny minnows filling up the cove nip at my leg, startling me out of my luxury. It is quite frightening, too, because they attack with no warning at all. In the end, Cassidy and I perch ourselves close to the shore and stand on the rocks. When Grandnana comes to call us inside, we realize that we have lost all track of time.

Chapter nine: Disaster in Disney

The soft hum of the bus lulls me to sleep as the wheels whisper across the highway, calling for the sun that has not yet arrived. Before drifting off into a dream world, I sneak a peek at Jody as she sits with her knees pulled up to her chest, intently watching the sleeping adolescents surrounding us. It is during Sherwood City School’s Winter Break, and the Pride of Sherwood Marching Band is going on a well-deserved excursion to Orlando, Florida, to visit three Disney and two Universal Studios amusement parks. I am certain that the entire trip will be spectacular! This time, I have allowed Jody to come along, because I know that this band trip will be special. After four long football and competition seasons, these marching musicians are finally taking a

break and going on an enjoyment journey. I couldn't imagine a better way to brighten my senior year and make my last few months at Sherwood High more memorable than I can imagine.

After a very early start on this Thursday morning, I join my younger brother, Cal, who feels the need to get everything that he can out of an experience, even if it means resisting the urge to sit down and rest on a trip that is supposed to be a vacation. I hope his defiance toward the desires of others does not cause a rather controversial dilemma during the trip. The group that I will spend most of my time with over the course of the excursion also includes my classmates Cara, Tiffany, Jacqueline, Alicia, and Brian. Cara and Tiffany are always together, often refusing to participate in an event if one of them is unable to attend. Last year, Tiffany told her date that she couldn't go to Homecoming when she found out that Cara had to suddenly leave on an emergency trip to visit a relative. I don't know very much about Jacqueline, though, because she barely speaks to anyone at all, and she hardly ever leaves her house, even on the weekends. Similar to Jacqueline, Alicia does not usually interject her thoughts either. On the contrary, she is always willing to assist those in need and volunteers advice readily when a crisis arises. Brian is a friend of my brother's, and he does whatever Cal plans, never rejecting his companion's ideas.

On Thursday, December twenty-ninth, everyone in the band wakes up bright and early at five o'clock in the morning to travel over to Magic Kingdom, one of the Disney parks, in order to pose for a photograph in front of Cinderella's castle. The day starts out very slowly, because no one, including me, wants to roll out of bed that early. It only makes it worse after trekking through an amusement park on Wednesday for hours after

darkness had set in and hitting the sack only after waiting for each squad to mousy over to the buses one by one to pick off every ounce of luggage. *I will never understand why band always goes hand in hand with sleeplessness. The situation should be the complete opposite, considering that all of the members need every possible inch of energy available in order to fulfill a complete timetable of events that include music.*

However, my view of the morning is now changing.

I cannot even begin to put into words how it feels to walk down Main Street USA in Magic Kingdom at 6:30 A.M. when it is still dark, no tourists are around, the entire street is lit up with Christmas lights, and there is a towering tree at the very end of the path. Behind it is the castle, silhouetted against the soft, strawberry custard horizon. It is as if I am walking through a scene in an old Christmas movie, in a perfect little town free from reality's difficulties. Silent employees, roused from the luxuries of their dark bedrooms fully equipped with creamy blinds the color of elephant tusks and long, plush drapes enveloping the carpet like the ocean invading the stagnant shore, set about their usual duties of creating a fairyland for the guests.

Wouldn't it be fun to work in Disney World, of all places? If I had a job here, hopefully I could enter the park for a discount, if not entirely free of charge. I often fantasize about having my very own theme park in my backyard so that I would not have to wait in so many lines. I wonder, though. After continuously hopping on the amusements everyday without delay, would I become bored with them? That would be a bummer. Maybe it is better that I cannot enjoy these journeys whenever I please. This way, I still have something to look forward to when my family goes on vacation.

As the frustrated group of my high school peers reverts back to the earlier, more carefree days of Kindergarten, trudging closely behind one another in rod-straight line, the diligent workers take a few moments to forget about their duties and gaze at the raccoon-eyed visitors. For a few brief moments, I watch them as they lay down their paint brushes and study our motley crew, some smiling as we shuffle our shiny, black, identical band shoes against the newly swept pavement. Soon, nevertheless, the glittering frivolities around me capture my concentration, and I feel as if I am walking through a dream world. Generously-sized wreaths adorn the spaces stretching between lampposts, tiny fire flies decorate every side and corner of every building, and the holiday music that fills the air brings a confirmation that the Christmas season is not yet over.

I adore Christmas music. I have to force myself to keep my collection locked away until after Thanksgiving, but after I finally dust it off, I could listen to it forever. It annoys me so much when people start airing "Deck the Halls" or "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" as they are hiding their pumpkin men away in storage following a night of sticky morsels and miniature adults under disguise. What ever happened to the Pilgrims and Native Americans? Where are their cornucopias and turkey decorations? Why does everyone have to rush so much? It drives me insane! Subsequent to the single day for which the carols were created, all of the radio stations automatically shut off every clue that holiday cheer ever existed there, turning back around completely to accommodate "the hits." It's so depressing. I mean, it's bad enough that Christmas is only one day a year, but doe the public have to rub it in even more?

“Single file! Get into a single file line! Doesn’t anybody understand what single file is? Why is this so difficult?” shouts a student leader at the head of the line as he turns his head to survey the exhausted collection of his classmates.

Can I just go back to bed?

Frustrated, I quicken my pace and continue to try to take in the world around me while constantly remaining aware of the bobbing ponytail only a few inches in front of my forehead.

Often, days with early beginnings start with unpleasant thoughts and experiences, but when night falls, I realize how much I have accomplished. Although I am rather uncomfortable when I step onto the Abbott bus early this morning, I now understand that making the effort to rise before dawn is often worthwhile. Everyday is unpredictable. It could be hushed and peaceful, like an empty house when the family has gone out of town. Or, it could be hectic and sporadic, similar to the activity of attempting to catch a rabid squirrel that has fallen down the chimney. My first outing to Disney World in Orlando without my entire family commences with a rather relaxing atmosphere without recognition to the thoughts of annoyance building up inside of the members of the band. However, I realize that the pace of the day will definitely speed up as the photographer snaps his last photo, breakfast comes to a close, and everyone escapes in the park to fight the crowds.

My free time for riding coasters and seeing attractions begins similar to the previous day in Universal Studios, and I find my younger brother and the group of other fellow band members with whom he has decided to roam the streets of the many appealing enticements.

“Have we added anymore people?” I question him, referring to the group he and I had led the day before.

“A few more,” he replies with earnest as he pulls his camera over his head and slaps on his baseball cap crookedly.

Then, switching modes to what is definitely most important to him, Cal begins to survey the map and quickly states, “O.K. We’ll go to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* first, and then we’ll try *The Haunted Mansion*.”

Sighing, I prepare to follow the person who will dictate the majority of the day’s events to the entire group, only occasionally bending away from his preplanned schedule.

The first few hours of the visit go by smoothly as I reminisce about my family’s vacation to this area when I was in the fourth grade. However, by the time the band reconvenes and marches in the “Mickey’s Merry Christmas Parade,” and everyone is allowed to again gallivant through the theme park, the day turns down a strange alley.

Everyone is a bit uncomfortable after peeling off thick, sweaty band uniforms in a room with people shoulder-to-shoulder and slapping on jeans meant for the early morning chilliness. The girls wear their hair in messy pony tails and buns forced as far up on their heads as they can place them. The boys emerge from the dressing rooms with drenched heads after taking turns at the sinks for brief previews of desired showers. The atmosphere is swarming with exasperation and anger. Refusing to all follow the same path and remain locked into a preset agenda, unable to make any decisions or change their minds at any time during the course of the day, the girls begin to argue about which activities to attend to first. Trying to bridge the gap between the communication of these younger students and the leader of the pack, I reassure them that I will convince my

brother to consider their suggestions. Unfortunately, he refuses, and while we are buying sodas at a stand next to one of the rides, two of the members of the crew get up and sneak off, apparently hoping to teach my brother a lesson for his attempt to tell them exactly everything they will do for the entire day in Disney.

“Where did they go?” my brother disgustedly shouts as he polls the remaining band members in our cluster as they huddle together for needed protection.

“I have no idea where Cara and Tiffany went! How am I supposed to know?” whimpers Jacqueline as I try to search the surrounding area for my two lost companions.

“Let’s split up and look for them,” suggests Brian, evoking even more anger in the torn apart assembly.

Is he crazy? How in the world are we ever going to find each other if we go every-which-way in this humongous park? It’s hard enough to find one missing person in this place! I will never forget the heartache my group had to go through two years ago when I went to an amusement park in Virginia with my youth group from church. Two girls wandered off, and our group had to spend the entire afternoon frantically searching for them and missing any possibility of boarding a single ride. Cal almost exploded.

“Mackenzie, you have got to think of a solution to this dilemma before a scratching festival begins.”

“Jody, they are not going to listen to me! Every time I show up at leaders’ meetings, most of my peers ignore me and act as if my position is completely insignificant. Give me a break. Half the band probably doesn’t even know what my job

is. Why are they going to listen to some random statement I make when everyone is going insane?”

“Just calm down. These people look up to you more than you could ever imagine, even if they don’t show it all the time. It doesn’t matter if they know the syllabus for your leadership position. I have seen how much you can accomplish when you put your heart into what you do, and they will respect you for your initiative.”

Eventually, I decide that everyone should simply go as a group into all the buildings in this section of the park and search every ride since no one has seen where our classmates have gone. To my surprise, all of my companions are quiet when I step into settle their dispute, and they nod their heads at my suggestions, gladly accepting a sensible solution that will keep all of them on good terms with one another.

It’s such a relief that all the girls and Brian have agreed to my decision. Even Cal hasn’t objected to my idea. I didn’t want to have to say anything gruff to hurt anyone’s feelings. That’s part of my problem with the band accepting me as a leader. I am constantly contemplating whether or not to express my convictions and attempting to find approaches that are “sweet” and “nice.” I hope no one interprets my behavior incorrectly and defines me as a coward and a slacker. In reality, my mind is bursting with proposals that are pleading for the chance to drive to the mall by themselves, go to a late night movie, or travel to the beach with a group of friends. Much to their despondence, I am one tough parent, barely letting them out for second long glimpses of their surroundings. I often give up when it comes to allowing my thoughts to ripen and mature out in the open air, because I am afraid of even one single word or phrase sounding not completely considerate or gentle. Yes, I realize that probably not a single

soul actually spends time interpreting the words escaping out of my mouth, but I can't help but wonder how my tones affect others. If I can feel hurt or sense the need to look deeper into a blunt comment on the other side of the phone, whose to say no one else reacts with the identical conscientiousness that I do?

For two tiring hours, the rest of us desperately search up and down all of the lines in *Tomorrowland*, often pushing pasted frustrated tourists who insist on insulting us as we go by them. It is at this point that Alicia, a sophomore who is trying very hard not to make anyone upset, proposes stopping by the nearby diner to look for Cara and Tiffany. Sure enough, sitting at one of the booths by the window, are the two runaways. A wave of sorrow for the two girls breaks over me as I watch the resentment and irritation arrive on the faces of the people who had painstakingly trudged through every corner of that section of Magic Kingdom, listening to the harsh words of other guests who were busy enjoying the countless activities the park has to offer. With only an hour left before the entire band will reconvene one last time before departing, I know that all of my peers, especially my brother, are extremely upset and very likely to bellow at Cara and Tiffany for their decisions.

Taking my brother gruffly by the arm, I whisper to him,

“Please do not yell at them. I know you're upset, but we have to remember that all of this has happened because of your refusal to listen to their suggestions. Everyone needs to simply calm down and discuss how we can work together as a team.”

Pulling away, his sunglasses falling down onto his nose, he prepares to forget about what I have said and lecture his classmates. Luckily, though, the other members hear my words of advice to him, and they begin to defend their friends.

“Everything is going to be fine. Don’t worry, Tiffany and Cara, we’re not mad at anyone,” reassures Alicia while she pulls the girls close to her side.

That’s the way to speak up!

“I don’t blame anyone for leaving. We should all be able to decide on the plan of action for each day on this trip,” adds Brian.

Awesome, Brian! Don’t let my brother control you any longer.

Ultimately, my brother realizes the importance of allowing everyone to have input in the daily schedules and decides that it is sometimes better to pause for a few moments during each day on this excursion to simply recognize how wonderful it is to merely be in Orlando, Florida, for almost an entire week. So, as the day comes to an end, and I sit next to my companions while gazing at the fireworks over the castle, I conclude that the rest of the trip will run beautifully, as long as everyone remembers to slow down and stop to glance at the simple aspects of life. It’s not everyday that a person can escape the usual pressures and responsibilities of existence and walk down the street of a perfect little Christmas town, admiring the lush greenery and sparkling lights and watching a diligent worker shining a shop window and whistling while he works.

Chapter ten: Easter eggs in North Carolina

I almost lost a very dear friend of mine yesterday. I now realize how important all of the guidelines she has set for me remain, especially as I grow older.

It is late Monday night, and I am watching a movie on *The Family Channel* on T.V., enjoying the fact that it is Spring Break. Ten long days of no school! I am in heaven. However, a horrific thought continues to creep into a tiny crevice in the back of

my mind, making the delight of lounging curled up under an afghan on the couch with no interruptions simply unbearable. Eventually, I cannot stand to lie here any longer, and I flip off the power on the talking box as an aggravated housewife starts purposely ruining her clothes with ketchup splotches so she can demonstrate the effectiveness of *Spray and Wash*. I must go find Jody.

Jody and I sit cross-legged on the edge of Cassidy's bed, chattering about the magnificent Easter and birthday celebrations taking place in Raleigh, North Carolina. After crossing our fingers for years and wishing for the luxury of having Good Friday free of studying, the snow has finally decided to stay far enough away from Sherwood as to ensure a day off from school before Spring Break's week-long stretch. After arriving at the Foster residence Friday evening, we all went out Saturday for bowling and supper in order to welcome in Cal's seventeenth year. It is now Easter Sunday, and with dinner behind us, the clock is slowly leading in the moment at which my family will have to return home to Sherwood.

"I wish egg hunting was like that at our house! Cal didn't have a clue where anything was hidden, and I probably collected twice as many as he did. It's even better that this time, there was candy in every egg!"

"Yeah, he doesn't have one reason to taunt you for this Easter egg hunt. I can't believe he has had the nerve to make fun of you *on tape* every year as he piles up all those plastic and hardboiled ovals in his overflowing basket while you run circles around him trying to keep up with his violent search."

“What’cha doing, Mackenzie?” clamors Cassidy as she lifts herself up onto the disco blue of her comforter.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking about the egg hunt this morning. You didn’t look too enthused to be looking for candy. You’ve got to loosen up a little bit. Have a little fun.”

Cassidy rolls her eyes as she flops over on her stomach to face me. “It’s not that big of a deal. I’ve got to let Lacey have a fair chance, anyway. “

“You won’t be a kid forever,” I warn. “Enjoy it while you can. So, what do you want to do now? How about Scategories?”

“No. I don’t really want to play another game right now. Let’s talk.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“What have you been writing in here?”

“Oh, not much. Just a few things about what we did this weekend.”

“Can I read it?”

Jody gives me a menacing stare as I begin to flip to the last entry in the book of memories we have composed together. Guiltily, I slide it into my suitcase, sorry that I would have ever thought of sharing the item that draws us so close together and forms the basis of our friendship.

“I’d rather you not, Cassidy. It’s nothing special, anyway. Like I said, just a list of what everyone did these past few days at your house.”

She gives me a rather repulsive look and starts to fish through my suitcase, searching for the sacred item.

I playfully battle with her when she pulls it out of the front pocket, threatening her with the wrath I will use on her if it becomes damaged.

“Ppplease, Mackenzie! Can’t I just read the part about yesterday?”

“O..K. You’re relentless. But you’ve got to give it back the second you finish that one page.”

I grumble under my breath, trying to appear aggravated with my cousin, avoiding the hurt in Jody’s eyes as she slumps in a chair across the room.

“Who’s Jody?” Cassidy turns to me with a quizzical expression on her face, pointing to a note I had recently written to my dearest companion.

“Oh, she’s just somebody I.... somebody I...”

Suddenly, I glimpse Jody walking toward the door, her face as white as the paper in our book. She turns her head toward me once before crossing the threshold, and I notice tears collecting in the corners of her eyes. I pull the treasured manuscript of secrets from Cassidy and run down the hall after my friend.

She is going full force through the house, and it takes me several minutes to grab her by the arm and stuff both of us into the linen closet next to the washer.

“You almost told her about me.”

“I know. I am truly sorry. It’s scary what another person can pull out of me, especially someone who I am closer with than most of my friends.”

“Do you promise to be more careful from now on? I know how much you love talking with Cassidy. You’ve told me hundreds of times in the past year. I realize it’s tough to hold back our secret from her, but in the end, it will be all worth it. Even she is not immune to the temptation to “fit the mold” of the world.”

“I promise. If I even come close to doing that again, you have my permission to lock me in my room for the rest of high school.”

Jody attempts to put on a serious mask, deepening her voice as she asks, “May I have your signature, madam, to verify that statement in the future?”

I laugh, punching her teasingly in the arm. I pull her close to me, and the remnants of her tears slightly dampen my hair. “You’re the best friend a girl could have, Jody. I will never do anything again to compromise that.”

We sit like that until it is time to go home, head to head and arm in arm.

Chapter eleven: Marching Memories

I am now with Mom and Cal at my very last Pride of Sherwood Marching Band Banquet in the cafeteria at the high school. Despite the fact that Taylor Leon, a member of my mellophone section for the past three years, and Carleton Howardson, another vital element of the group for two years, have showered me with farewell gifts and hugs, I am becoming quite squeamish at the thought of reading my entire speech in front of the room filled with a seemingly endless number of parents and students. The reality that no other seniors have spoken for even a full minute when their turns to receive plaques have approached, and my oration is rather lengthy, does not help matters, either.

Well, Mr. Fulton has called my name. Here goes nothing!

“Through this extraordinary organization, I have been able to impel myself to move farther in my expectations than I had ever dreamed before. I learned to not merely dive for a broken clam shell at the bottom of the ocean, but to search for the pearls within. Even after an

hour of attempting to learn a specific portion of the marching show during rehearsal, with the determination of those around me, I still desired to find another area with needed adjustment and tackle it until success was found. Surrounding me were individuals very different and yet extremely similar as a result of the central goal they were striving to meet, and I realized that my decision to either finish until the end or halt prior to correcting a problem affected them as well. As I learned the true meaning of cooperation, it brought me great pride to know that my accomplishments represented something on a grander scale, and this drove me even more to reach for the stars in my aspirations. However, I could never have grown into the person I am today without the foundation beneath me consisting of the words of encouragement, lessons, suggestions, and smiles from my fellow band members through the years. Some of you may not know it, but you have had a tremendous impact on my life.

Band is one of those activities that you will not miss if you've never experienced it. I could have gone on without band and never known the difference, but fortunately, I am blessed enough to say that I did not. If I had not been apart of this welcoming community of my peers, I would never have been acquainted with the joy and satisfaction that comes when you finally make a hit, when you fix a mistake in the show that you've been plagued with for the past few run-throughs, when you get something right.....”

Chapter twelve: Light in a Dollhouse

Sometimes I wish I that I could just hop in my car and drive backwards in time. I'm always saying this to my parents and friends, because the requirements life is putting on me now often seem endless. I drift back to my high school days when all I wanted was to have an easy life.

The snow falls without ceasing, piling on top of my family's green minivan out in the driveway. I pull the thick blanket tightly over my sock feet and lean back against the couch to watch a much younger version of myself dancing in circles around the coffee table in the family room.

“What did I do with all of my time back then? Wasn't I ever bored?”

“You were a kid, and you were happy doing that sort of thing.”

“Well, even if I was ever bored twirling in the same spot for thirty minutes without taking one break, it wouldn't have been such a bad thing. I'd like to be bored for a change. Even today, with no school, I still have an English paper and math homework to finish.”

“You wouldn't want to have to go through all of those years of school again, would you?”

“No, but sometimes I would really like to travel back to elementary school and stay there the rest of my life.”

I wander downstairs to my family's game room, the former setting of all of my imaginative games when I was more youthful. I sigh. It looks so different from what it

previously resembled when my friends once came over to “pretend” with my toys. Those were the days.

Anyway, I’ve got to get back to collecting my necessities. I have to leave for college in two days, and if I don’t get started finding everything, I’ll be up all night finishing the compiling of my things.

I despise packing! It takes me forever, because I always find something that catches my attention and pulls me off track.

Let’s see. Where is a box that can hold all of my picture frames? I doubt there are any that are the right sizes since I have so many. I love to take snapshots of all of my cousins.

Ah hah! Here’s one! I’ll take it upstairs and try to cram everything into it.

Wow! I can’t believe this is still in here! I had forgotten about my dollhouse! Those were the days. I wonder if I still remember the names I gave all of the figurines. Hmm.... I’ll take it out and look for just a few minutes. A few minutes can’t hurt anything.

Oh yes! I remember this! The petite heart-shaped button on the front of the miniature dresser has a shade of pink like a preschooler’s Sleeping Beauty Halloween costume that she proudly displays while waltzing daintily down Main Street in a Saturday parade.

The intricate indents and shapes on the front of the piece of furniture hold so much detail. I feel as if I am a giant like in the well-known story Gulliver’s Travels. At an earlier age, I often speculated that I lived in a world similar to that of the dollhouse characters, moving as a result of a larger being’s choices. The nightstand brings

memories of new days, of Saturday mornings when I crept down to the basement while everyone else was still asleep. It is the morning horizon, basking in the gentle hue that arrives to signal new beginnings. The lamp is the sun, peeking out sluggishly at first before it obtains the courage to show its face.

My life is this dollhouse stand that has hidden itself from my reminiscence for so long. There are so many details to my existence that I often forget about the worn ones when I move onto new, more exciting sites. The complex lines, hearts, and designs of my first loves and interests sink to the back of my mind even though they have never moved from where I originally placed them. Each carving on the accessory makes it a piece of artwork in itself. However, I forget through the years that those marks exist even though my eyes once touched the object's outline everyday.

Where is the girl I used to be? I often cease to recall the passions that long ago took hold of my heart. As I've grown older, I have deposited my innocent imaginings since they fail to serve me in the real world.

It really is a shame that I have put my days of bringing to life my ideas through characters to a pause. I cannot fathom how long it has been since I have written merely for enjoyment. I vaguely remember those days. My life was so different back then. I would constantly be creating dream worlds and little girls similar to myself who lived in the past, present, and future. On weekends, I would wake up before dawn and sprawl out on the plush, ocean blue carpet in the dining room, allowing my ideas that had built up for days or even weeks to overflow from my newly sharpened pencil onto the strict format of the lined paper. As the sun, like a young boy tugging on his mother's dress, obnoxiously poked through the blinds and soaked past the delicate curtains, I would still

remain in that position, striving to overlook my weariness from lying in one place for so long.

Finally, when my last line had bounded onto the page, I would leap up and proceed in reading my masterpiece to everyone in my family. Those were the days.

Now, I have gotten so caught up in schoolwork, band, and applying for college and scholarships, I have allowed my innovative thoughts to slide away and into a dark, deep crevice. Even with a magnificent pause in all the chaos this summer, I have not pursued revisiting my dusty inventiveness. The thought of even typing one sentence into a word document makes me shudder, and most of my days these past few weeks have taken place outdoors.

The outdoors. Oh, how I love the warm sun on my face! Before this season, how long had it been since I had spent more than thirty minutes with the grass under my feet? Let's see..... I can't even remember since the time has been so elongated!

I have never tried to stand out in life. Sometimes I wish I was more exotic. I always cringe at events when music starts and everyone begins dancing or doing hand motions. What is the matter with me? I just do not feel comfortable revealing myself in an uncontrolled manner in front of other people. This is why I adore tints that are not exotic, like the strawberry yogurt-colored pink that spills across the plastic replica sitting next to the miniature baby bed in one of the dollhouse's upstairs rooms. Pastels calm me down and give me a new strength. They are subtle and quiet, like seashells the ocean has caressed until they are free of any ridges or tough edges. As I gaze at the fixture, I almost want to curl up on the recliner with a perfect fantasy tale, because it reminds me

of the soft and smooth belly of my West Highland White Terrier when he collapses on the kitchen floor after an extended walk.

Oh no! Look at the time! It couldn't have been forty-five minutes! Why do I always do this to myself? The past is so appealing to me. I am sure I could spend an entire week sorting through all my keepsakes and still have an infinite count of remembrances waiting for me behind a closet door.

Come on, Mackenzie old girl. Get up! You've got to finish packing for college. You're not six anymore. You're eighteen! Eighteen. College. Moving away from home. No! Can it be true? I have always believed I would never reach this point. Oh well. Hopefully I will have more time to breathe once I arrive there. I cannot wait until my schedule is not so crammed. Maybe I can take up writing again. Maybe....

Sheets? Check. Pillow? Check. Alarm clock? Darn! I left the box for my pictures downstairs. Where is my mind?

I am really starting to not want to leave. Have I even begun to touch the surface of my childhood aspirations? What has happened to the writing career I planned? It is definitely a microorganism compared to my past hopes. I wonder if I will ever forget about my love for short stories once I have gone away. Everything seems so black and white now and so plain and dull.

Wait a minute. What am I thinking? My life has definitely not been either of those terms. For two years, I assisted in running Daisy Troop 1258 with the Senior Girl Scouts. I invented a few crafts for the younger girls and even created a puppet show with a script. This past year, I accomplished something I had never imagined I could and established a tutoring program.

.....“I chose to establish a tutoring program for my Girl Scout Gold Award, because I believe that children are an extremely essential part of the community since they will lead society in the future, and they need constant encouragement to succeed in all of their learning endeavors.”

It was a blast formulating contemporary games for the children.

.....“On Thursdays, I aided the pupils with studying for Social Studies and Science tests by creating cards with graphics representing the topics so they could review while competing with each other.”

How can I forget about band?

..... “I am overly thrilled to announce that this year, I am the mellophone section leader! Being the oldest, I actually am able to lead my own sectionals!”

As a result of my ability to speak up as a leader, the group has instigated countless crisp techniques this year.

...“Everyone needs to simply calm down and discuss how we can work together as a team.”

The list of opportunities I have had is endless.

Now I realize that even if I do not project my goals through writing, I am able to do so by utilizing my actions. Maybe I will become a famous author. Maybe I won't. Nevertheless, no matter what, my light of imagination will not extinguish, even if it seems to dim at times. I suppose all I need to do is go back to the origin of my fantasies, to a

minute room packed away in the depths of my memories. There I will always discover my imagination is still there, burning with a light that will never die.

Chapter thirteen: New lives and Goodbyes

The ghosts of Labor Day barbeques still linger in the early morning air as I swing open the car door to a gust of humidity as summer battles to keep its baring.

I hurry through a familiar entrance, the heels of my new shoes clicking on the tiled floor, like a time bomb threatening the closure of an era. Smiles from years past light up the office as I thumb through a stack of paper lying in my mailbox and rush back out the double doors I have recently entered. I am not quite sure of the reasons for my haste on this day. I suppose that all I want is a few quiet moments alone before the next several hours turn into a whirlwind. The room is open, beckoning me with miniature tables adorned with nametags with big letters, bright posters lining the once barren walls. I trace the outline of the letters on my own plain nameplate, smudging the new copper with my fingerprints. Pulling away, like a toddler upon realizing the heat of a burning stove, I drift through the open spaces. The room transforms into another as my hand robotically pulls out a plastic seat, and I invite myself to explore its boundaries, as if in a dream.

My life is so confusing. I can never understand why adults do the things they do. I am going to some kind of garden tomorrow where Mommy and Daddy tell me I will meet a lot of new friends. Why do they do this to

me? I have already found my favorite spot in preschool, over beside the bookshelf in the corner.

Oh no! What will happen to my pillow! Aaron better not sit on it! He wasn't very nice to me when I went over to his house about one hundred weeks ago. I don't like his masks at all. They scare me.

Big school will have older kids, too. I do not think I will ever be that tall. I have never seen a fifth grader before. What exactly is a fifth grader, anyway? I can count to five. Does that make me a fifth grader? I hear that they can read stories without pictures, though, so I guess I am not one. How is that possible, anyway? Doesn't a person have to have pictures to know what happens next? How do those blank shapes on the page tell someone what to say? I know how to make a few of them into my name, but when I write them, they look very different. They are bigger and take up a whole page. Anyway, I still don't understand what the rest of the shapes in a book are there for since I never use them. The pictures always tell me what comes next. I do know how to match a few shapes to the drawings in a book about a little boy and weather. Everyone claps when I point to a line on the page and say a word, but it doesn't make any sense to me.

Why do I have to go to the place called school? What will I do there? I already know the names of the shapes and colors. What more could I discover? Will I learn how to write more than my name?

Why is everyone standing in my driveway? My parents tell me that a bus is coming to take me away. Why are they videotaping me? I am always trying to talk to Daddy, but he is usually looking through his black box. I think it is his favorite toy. Everyone is taking pictures of me! What is the big deal? I am just going to another place to play with more stuffed animals and read books.

This place is so big! Look at all the kids! I did not know there were so many people in the world. I think I would like to go home now.

I do not see anyone from preschool. I did not like when Lauren played with my hair, but I think we are friends again. She showed me pictures from her trip to Disney World.

Wow! Look at all these neat toys! Maybe Kindergarten will not be so bad after all. There is even a bunny rabbit! I hope he can come out and play. He is a baby, so I need to be very, very careful with him. Babies must be very breakable, because when I tried to play puppets with my baby cousin

Cassidy at Christmas, she cried, and my aunt made me go into the other room. I was very upset! I did not want to hurt her.

The teacher is calling all of the kids over to her rocking chair to read a book. Look at all of those books on the shelf! It will take me until I go to college to read all of them! When will I go to college? I think that happens after I finish fifth grade, but I am not sure. By the time I become a fifth grader, I will be all grown up and probably have a job.....

An announcement on the intercom brings me back to present day, and I rummage through my bag, anticipating when my fingers will lead me to my desire. For a few long moments, I grasp leather-bound composition books filled with pages blurred, waiting without faces for a purpose and identity. Finally, my fingers graze a worn, cardboard-like object, and I glide them over the familiar plastic rings holding it together. As I pull it out and open to the last sheet, movement nearby causes me to jump and put aside this particular project.

“Jody, I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“Wouldn’t miss your first day at work for the world.”

Her calm, steady gaze stables my violently beating heart as she watches my reaction intently.

I sigh heavily. “We haven’t spent much time together these past few summers. I miss you.”

“You’ve got to understand that although we will always be connected through our heart and mind and share the same joys and hardships, it is impossible to be forever together physically. You once needed me to discover the person you really are, but now you’re all grown up. Whether you know it or not, you have learned to make decisions everyday that are the essence of all the time we spent together. You are finally ready to make your dreams a reality. Believe me. I have never been more positive of anything in my life. You must trust me and hold onto the child inside of you. I have seen you draw close to that little girl many times before, and I recognize that you can do it again and again and for an eternity.”

My voice is barely a whisper above the reckless thumping of my heart and the pounding in my ears.

“Please. Please, Jody, don’t go. I realize now how careless I have been in our friendship. For so many years, I have pushed you away as I embark on the more difficult responsibilities in my life. I was trying so hard to ensure you were comfortable. Nevertheless, more than a decade of trials and tasks have taught me that guiding me through the monstrosities, being by my side no matter the cost, is what plants a twinkle in your eye and a hop in your step. You live for the sole purpose of making me smile and helping me grow. Stay with me, Jody. I promise I will run to you whenever I have a problem, and we can search for solutions together.”

A weak smile forces itself onto her lips as a wave of anguish splashes across her tear-stained face.

“I believe in you, Mackenzie, more than you may ever know. But you don’t have to travel this earth alone. I will be in your daydreams when you reminiscence about

childhood, in your thoughts when you contemplate dilemmas, in your emotions when heartbreak and happiness embrace you tightly, and in your heart where only your most ambitious goals and desires reside.”

I sit motionless, unable to utter a single syllable as she slowly melts into me so that we become one person, one dreamer, one soul.

“Ms. Hilary, the children will be ready to meet you in a few moments. The buses have arrived, and the little ones are receiving their classroom numbers now. Are you prepared?”

I nod, fumbling through my bag to ensure that all of my materials are present. As the principal exits the room, I jot a quick note on the open page grinning up at me from the table.

Thank you, Jody!

I will never forget the countless hours I have spent recording messages in you, because you have allowed me to make every minute special and instructed me to search for my earliest aspirations before transforming my ideas into actions. I now know that every dream, regardless of the dimensions, is possible if you gaze upon it with the eyes of a child.