

A GOOD THUMB IS A GOOD FRIEND

(Sucking thumb, then pulling it swiftly from mouth and regarding it proudly.) I don't care what anybody says. I'm a thumbsucker and proud of it! Oh, sure, grownups will tell you it's bad for your teeth. And the bullies and smarty-pants in your life will try to make you feel dweebish. But I say this to them — *(Sucks thumb, pops it out with a flourish.)* your thumb is your best friend in the whole wide world! For one thing, you always know where to find it. It's never going to just wander away from you or be on vacation. It's never going to talk about you behind your back. Or break your toys or grab the last piece of candy in the bowl, the candy *you've* been wanting all day! Nope, a good thumb is a good friend. And I've got two of them! *(Sticks both thumbs in mouth.)*

A SNOWFLAKE AGAIN

Yesterday I was in a cemetery watching my grandmother get buried. It was pretty cold, and I was wearing a warm navy blue coat. It started to snow, the first snow of the winter. I watched the snowflakes fall, not many at first, just floating down from the grey sky like they were leaves falling from trees in autumn. I held out my sleeve, and as the snowflakes landed on my coat, I looked at them. I looked at them really closely and I could see that each snowflake really did have a different pattern. Each snowflake was a special thing that came into the world for a short time and then melted away into the air. And after that, it might become a snowflake again. Or it might become a drop of rain that made a plant grow. Or a molecule of gas that vanished into the sun or even farther into outer space where it might become part of whatever it is that creates the spark of life in the universe, the spark some people call a "soul" and makes each one of us who ever live in this world a unique and completely special person like no one else before or after. So now, whenever it snows, I think of each snowflake being somebody's soul. Travelling to a new life. And being happy to get back out into the universe again. Really, really happy.

REALLY MINIATURE GOLF

Last night my friend and I went to a putt-putt golf course. That's where you play miniature golf and try to get the ball past a lot of obstacles. If I owned a putt-putt golf course, I'd make it *really* miniature. I'd have a De-Bigulator Machine that shrank you down to one inch tall, and then you'd play on real-life courses. Like your living room floor in between all the furniture and stuff lying around like shoes and cats and big dustballs. Or a jungle putt-putt out in your backyard, whacking your way past ants and grasshoppers and giant dandelions. Or inside a hamster cage or an aquarium. Or on a birdbath with birds zooming in and out. Or on the kitchen table with plates of food all set out. "Whoops! The mashed potatoes are leaking! It's an avalanche! The gravy is flooding! Run for your life!" Then, when you finished the course, you'd step into the Un-De-Bigulator Machine and come back to normal size.

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IF I WON A MILLION DOLLARS

If I won a million dollars, I would find a home for every stray cat and dog. I would make sure every child got a gift for their birthday. I would plant a tree on every street and a flower in every window. I would paint all the old run-down houses on my block in sunshine colors. I would have fireworks in the sky every night and give every parent a penny to tell their children how much they love them. If I won a million dollars, I would buy harmonicas for every person in the world and hire every music hall to hold harmonica concerts every night and day and fill the world with so much music that pretty soon . . . no one would need to care about money at all.

BICYCLE PEOPLE

Our teacher says that there would be less air pollution if more people rode bicycles to work instead of driving cars. I know how there would be even less pollution than that — if people *were* bicycles! Think about it when you were born, you had an operation that fitted wheels onto your legs and gear shifts onto your hands. Then as you grew, you could roll around at the same time you learned to walk. And you wouldn't need a lot of chairs or sofas in your house. You could just lean up against the wall when you wanted to rest. And when you played baseball or football or basketball or any kind of moving sport, you could go really fast because you'd be moving on wheels. Then again, if people were bicycles, you'd have to spend a lot of time cleaning your spokes and oiling your gears. And you'd always have to worry about getting left out in the rain and rusting!

TOTEM SPINACH

I'm sorry, Mom. I cannot eat the spinach. Spinach is my totem animal. Eating your totem animal is a taboo, a crime against the divine order that can bring misfortune and death. Mom? Mom, stop laughing! I am very serious! You can't go around eating your totem animals and expect to stay healthy! Where did I hear this nonsense? I read it in one of your books from college! A totem animal is an animal who protects you. From what? Well, from my science teacher giving us too much homework. And from forgetting my umbrella on days it rains. And from having to pass the weirdo next door when he walks his invisible cocker spaniel up and down the street. You see, Mom, by not eating spinach, I'm actually living a healthier, happier life. What? Spinach isn't an animal? (chuckles.) Nice try, Mom! Next thing you'll be telling me is hamburgers don't grow on ham trees!

SECONDHAND STORE

My friends and I are doing a play from the 1950s, so we went to a secondhand store to find some old jackets and hats. A secondhand store is where people take old things they don't want any longer — like clothes and furniture and books — so the store can sell them to people who don't have much money to buy new things. It works out for everybody, I guess. We were about to leave when I saw a row of stuffed animals huddled together on a chipped brown shelf. There was a teddy bear with an ear missing and a rabbit with all its fur chewed off. A dog with its big red tongue hanging out and a baby monkey that still smiled even though the person who had owned him had left him there at the secondhand store and wasn't ever coming back. Each one of those animals had their own story. They'd all been loved — sometimes almost to pieces — and then brought there to sit on a dusty shelf, alone now, except for each other. I wanted to say to that monkey, "Come on, buddy, you're coming home with me!" But I didn't. Because I was afraid. Afraid that when I got him home, he would talk to my animals. And tell them about where they were going to live in a few years. And I just thought that's not something they should hear right now.

RIP VAN WINKLE

I think one of the coolest stories ever is *Rip Van Winkle* by Washington Irving. This fellow Rip goes bowling in the woods, drinks some magic kool-aid and falls asleep. When he wakes up, it's twenty years later! Wouldn't that be the perfect excuse for missing a math test? Or not cleaning your room or doing chores. "Sorry, Mom, I was asleep for twenty years. Hope somebody fed the cat. Can I have all my allowance, anyway?" If you woke up twenty years from now, you'd be an adult already and would have missed the entire rest of school. Yes! You'd have your driver's license. Yes! And maybe a cool car. Yes! And maybe a family of your own. Whoa! Waaaaaaait a minute! You might be married to someone you didn't like. And working a job you hated. And still having to do chores. *And* wanting to sneak off into the woods and fall asleep for twenty years. Just like Rip Van Winkle!

ELF PRESSURE

(Yawning, rubbing eyes.) Gosh, I had another weird dream! A big giant whale dressed in a Dallas Cowboys football uniform was talking to me about the beet-and-spinach casserole mom served for dinner last night. Yeh, kinda crazy, I know. Soon as the hardware store opens up this morning, I'm going to buy some elf repellent and spray my room before I sleep tonight. Bet you didn't know weird dreams and nightmares were caused by elves sitting on your chest. They figured that out a long time ago in Germany. In fact, the German word for nightmare is "alp-drücken." That means "elf pressure," and sometimes more than one elf sits on you and they squeeze all your body weight up into your brain, which causes the extra pressure that gives you weird dreams and nightmares. It's a scientific fact! I read an article in *Elf Digest!* Anyway, if the hardware store is out of elf spray, I'll ask my parents to put some elf glue on the windowsill to slow them down a bit. I can't take another night of dreaming about beet-and-spinach casserole — especially after I've already had to eat it.