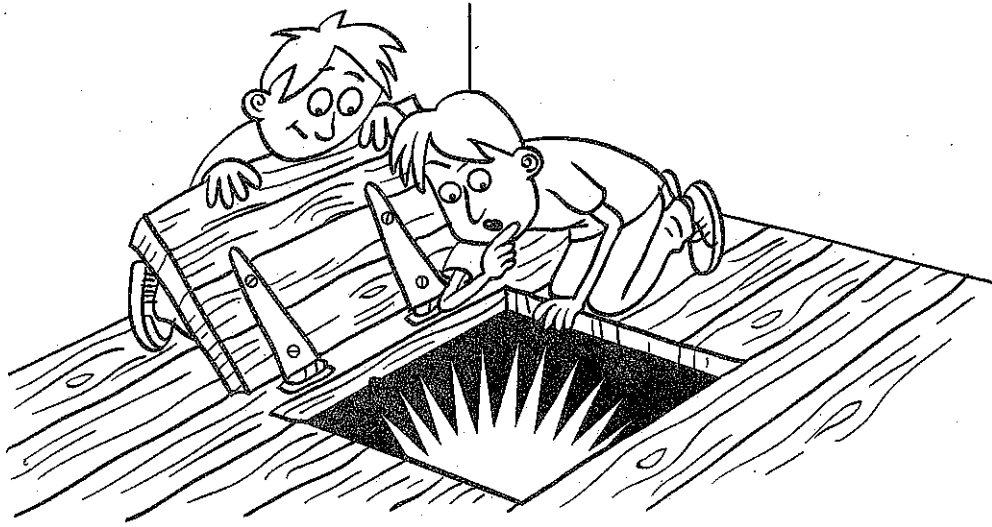


Door in the Floor



"Abandon hope, ye scalawag!" David yelled and swiped his stick sword at his friend Steven. They charged each other up and down the haystack in the old barn behind David's farmhouse. Today they were pirates, yesterday they were cowboys, tomorrow who knows?

"Arrrr! Blimey! You got me!" Steven uttered a dramatic gasp, clutched his chest and fell backward, down the stack of loose hay and onto the floor of the barn.

Laughing, David called, "Hey Steven, come on back up! You can stab me this time!" He called again, "Steven? Come on up." But Steven didn't appear.

"Hey David!" he heard Steven yell. "Come here! You gotta see this!"

"What? What'd you find?" David slid down the hay bales.

"Check this out. There's a door in the floor." Steven stood over what looked like a trap door. A large metal ring and two hinges were all that marked its place.

David frowned as he stood beside Steven. "That's really weird. I've never seen that before. Let's see where it goes." Together they grasped the ring and lifted with all their strength. A blast of hot wind hit their faces. Dust billowed around their feet. The scorching air smelled ancient and stale.

They let the trap door fall open with a thud and bent to look into the darkness.

And then . . .

Gone Camping



Brian lugged his sleeping bag and suitcase to the car, which was now stuffed to the roof with everything a family could possibly need for a weekend camping trip. He and his sister squeezed themselves into the back seat. Luckily, the drive was only an hour.

When they arrived at the entrance to the campground, the ranger at the gate took their money and pointed them toward the campsite. Just before they drove off he said, "By the way, we've heard reports of a strange animal around these parts. We don't quite know what it is, but I recommend keeping your children close after dark." Brian wasn't sure what that meant, but he didn't like the sound of it.

After helping his family set up, Brian was ready to go off exploring. There was still plenty of daylight left, so that "strange animal" wouldn't be bothering him, right?

"I'm going down to the creek, Mom," he called to his mother.

"I don't know about that, hon," his mom said. "You heard the park ranger."

"Oh Mom, I'll be fine. It's not far, and I'll stay on the path."

"All right, but be back in an hour," his mom relented.

Special Delivery

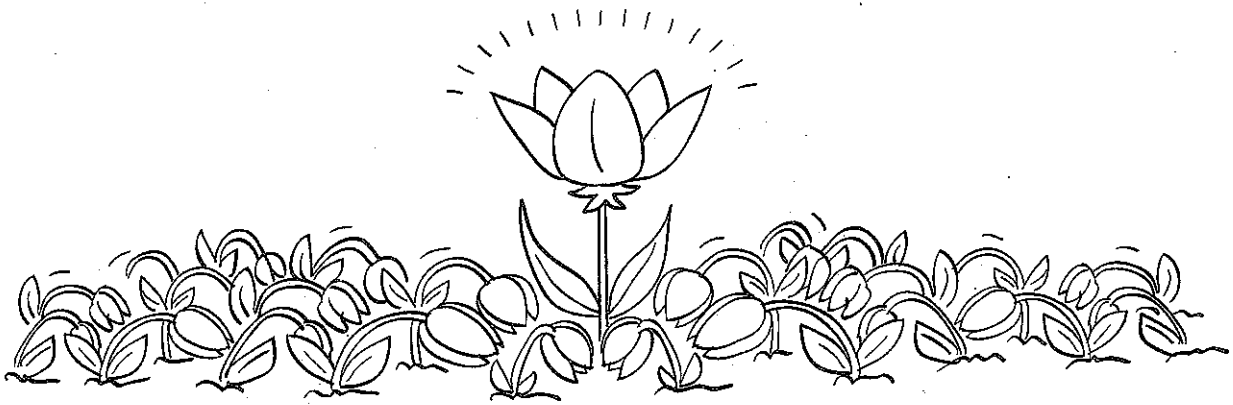


Ding dong. Sallie heard the doorbell ring, then her mom opening the door. She mumbled something and then called, "Hey Sallie, you've got a package from your wacky uncle!"

In a flash, Sallie was on her way. Her birthday was in three days, and this had to be her present from Uncle Russ. This amazingly cool guy traveled all over the world to exotic places, and every year he sent Sallie a birthday present that somehow surpassed the one she got the year before.

Sallie skidded to a stop in front of her mom who held a huge square box. Taking it in her arms, Sallie was shocked at how light it was. It felt empty! But she knew whatever was inside would be something incredibly awesome and wonderfully weird. She quickly sliced through the packing tape with scissors, opened the flaps, and started digging through armfuls

Flower Power



"Sara, come see this!" Lauren called to her big sister as they walked home from school.

"Oh, come on, Lauren. You're such a slowpoke."

"I'm not a slowpoke. Look at these flowers!"

"We've seen these flowers a million times," Sara complained. "And I want to get home. I'm hungry."

"These are different. Really different. Look." Lauren squatted beside a patch of bright orange flowers.

Sighing, Sara started back. "What's so special about a bunch of orange . . . What's that noise?" A sound of bells, or tinkling glass, grew louder with each step. "That's not the flowers, is it?"

"Yeah, it is. You can smell them, too." Lauren took a deep breath. Her sister did the same and inhaled a scent like chocolate, honey, and cotton candy all at once.

Each tightly closed bloom was about the size of a fist perched on the end of a long stem, but they didn't face the sun the way most flowers do. One flower stood straight in the center of the patch, while the others bobbed their heads toward it, like subjects before a throne.

"What are they doing?" Lauren asked.

"I think they're bowing to the middle flower," Sara answered, and as they watched, a light began shining from inside the center flower, quivering like a little flame. The girls' eyes grew wide as the petals slowly began to open, first the outer petals, then an inner layer. Finally, the flower fully opened, and the girls witnessed what no eye had seen before.

And then . . .

Genie in My Lamp



Maria couldn't wait to plug in the new, adorable, pink lamp she got for her birthday. It had a round base in an eye-popping shade of hot pink, which she loved. But the best part was the lampshade. It was white with shiny pink polka dots, a row of pink puffballs around the top, and a swishy pink fringe that hung off the bottom edge. It even had twinkle lights that sparkled from inside the shade.

Maria put the lamp on her desk and plugged it in. The lamp trembled. Purple smoke poured from the top. Maria jumped on her bed, watching in amazement. The smoke slowly formed into the upper part of a man. He had dark skin and wore a turban, though where his legs should be, he had only the lamp shade.

"I AM THE GENIE OF THE LAMP," he spoke grandly.

Maria couldn't help smiling. The Genie of the Lamp was wearing her polka-dotted, sparkly lampshade like a skirt. She giggled. He really looked ridiculous.

"Why are you amused?" asked the genie, his expression stern. When he spoke, his lampshade skirt swished smartly.

"I'm sorry, but you do look kind of funny wearing my lampshade."

The genie looked down at the lamp. "Ah, I see," he said. He sighed.

"I had some trouble with the International Genie Association last week.

Family Outing



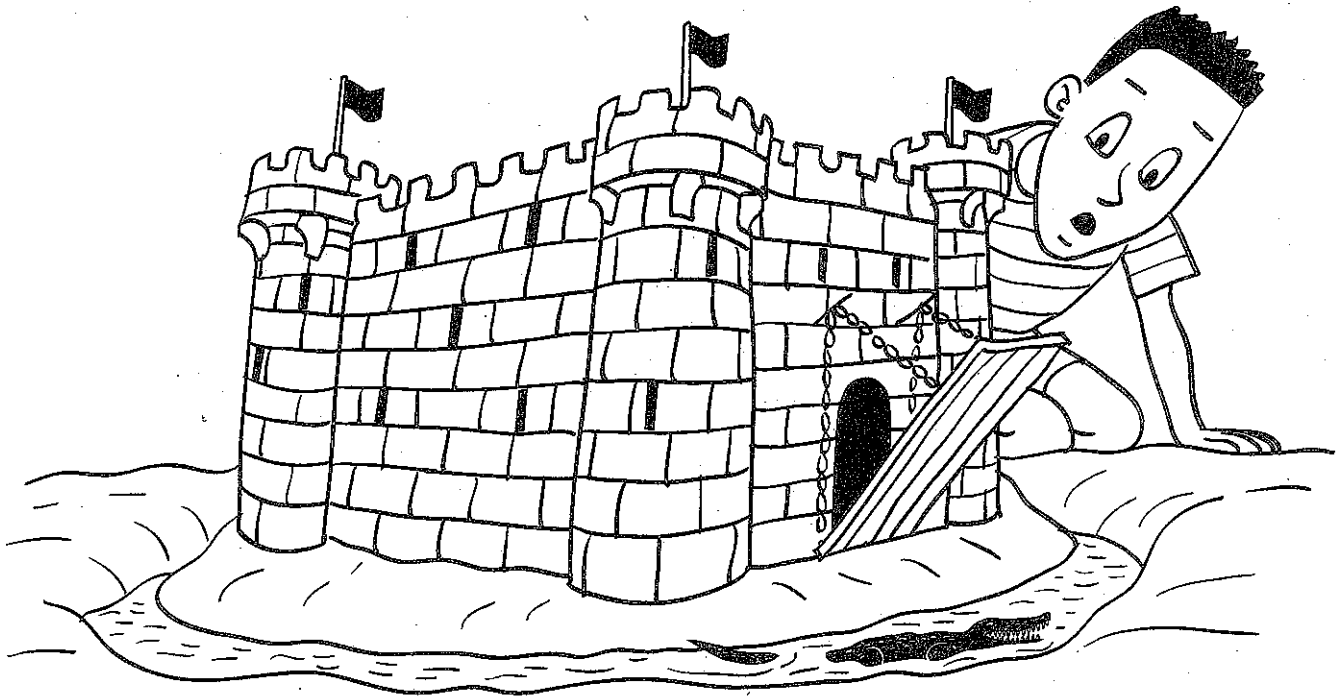
Christopher scuffed his feet along the trail as he followed his parents, three brothers, and sister through the woods. *I'm thirsty, my feet hurt, and I'm sure a million mosquitoes have bitten me by now*, he thought as he scratched at his elbow. "Will you guys slow down? Not everyone is feeling so energetic on this hike, you know." He scowled as his mom just turned and smiled at him. As his family's voices faded around a curve, he sat on a stump beside the path. *Well, I'm taking a rest even if they aren't.*

In the sudden quiet he became aware of odd sounds around him. Faint music, laughter, the clinking of glasses, and happy voices shouting to each other. *Sounds like a party*, he thought. *But how can there be a party in this wilderness?* Strangely, the noises seemed to originate in a clump of bushes just off the path. He stepped closer, quietly, hoping not to be seen spying. It was darker under the canopy of leaves, and what caught his eye was a beam of light shining straight out of a hole in the ground at the base of a tree. It was only as big as a rabbit hole, but the party noises were definitely coming from there. The music sounded like tiny fiddles, guitars, and horns.

Christopher tiptoed up to the hole and *snap!* He stepped on a dry twig. The noises ceased. Whispers took their place. Christopher crouched silently and waited.

And then . . .

Sand Castle

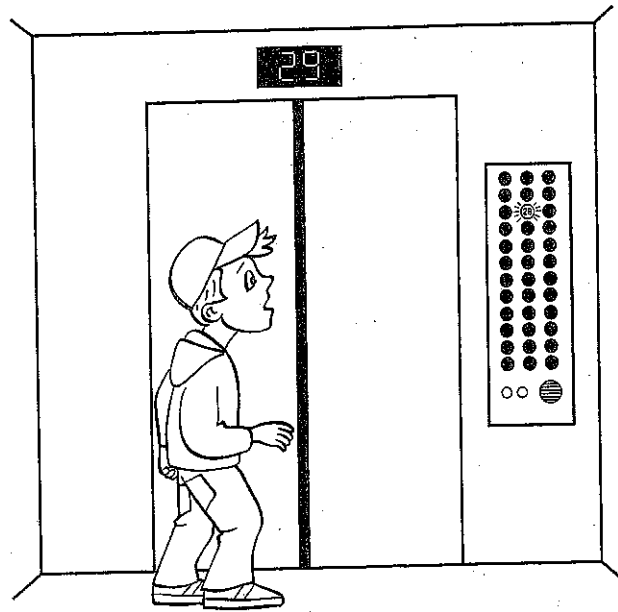


Mason dumped his stuff on the damp sand, the kind that's perfect for building a castle. After a week at this place, he was getting pretty good. The tide was going out, so he knew he had several hours before the waves would flood his site. *Hope Mom doesn't notice all the stuff I swiped from the kitchen*, he thought, as he emptied a bag of tools.

After an hour of steady effort, he sat back and viewed his creation. *Hmmm, still has a ways to go. The moat is good, and the walls are smooth, but it's still too plain.* His stomach growled. *I'll add the details after lunch.* He hiked back up the sand dune to the beach house, collecting bits of stuff along the way—feathers, shells, small seaweed leaves.

Mason wolfed down his mac and cheese and slid back down the dune, anxious to get back to work. *Someone's been messing with my castle!* he thought as he approached it. He scanned the beach in both directions, but it was deserted. He squatted to get a better look at the damage. *Actually, it's not really ruined, but it's definitely different.* He saw tiny flags flying from the towers. Turrets had been carved around the top. An actual wooden drawbridge with miniature chains blocked the castle door

Going Up



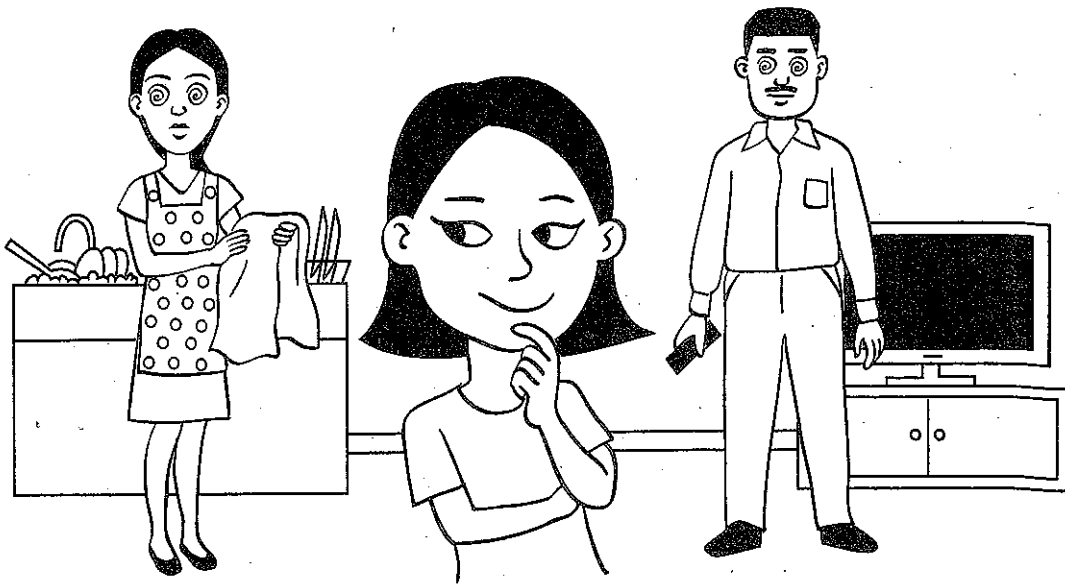
Daniel wasn't really thrilled about the new apartment building his family had moved into. The only cool thing about it was the elevator. His old building didn't have one, but now they lived on the fourth floor, so he got to ride it every day.

Today he was going home and was about to turn right to his hall elevator when he decided to mix things up and turn left instead. There was an elevator for this hall, too, so why not give it a try? He pushed the up arrow and stepped in. *Good! No one else going up.* He reached for button number four but was suddenly confused by the panel. There were lots more than four numbers. In fact, the numbers went all the way to 36! *How can there be thirty-six numbers? There aren't thirty-six floors. Maybe it's a spare-parts elevator, and only the first four buttons work.* But since he was in a mix-it-up mood, he decided to push a spare-part number. *Let's try number 29.* The number lit up, the doors closed, and the elevator started to rise. The display panel above the door read "2," then "3," then "4," and kept going. Daniel's heart started to pound. 15, 16, 17. His hands started to sweat. *How do I get out of here?* 22, 23, 24. The elevator slowed, then stopped when the panel read "29." The doors dinged and slid open.

"Hello, Daniel. Welcome to floor number 29."

And then . . .

Casting Spells



Nandita scanned the library shelves. There it was! She quickly checked out *Casting Spells* and shoved it in her backpack. This was the only book on wizards and magic she hadn't read, so she hoped it would be a good one. Of course, she knew it was all make-believe, but pretending was what made it all so much fun.

When she got home, Nandita opened the book to the table of contents. There were chapters called "Chants," "Incantations," "Love Spells," "Beauty Spells," and "Power Spells." Hmmm, which one to try first? "Power Spells" sounded good. She'd love to have power over her little sister, and Mom and Dad, too. Wouldn't it be cool to be the most powerful person in her school? Ha! *OBEY ME all you little people!*

She flipped to the page titled "Obedience Spell" and read the instructions. It seemed easy enough, so she set to work gathering materials: a candle (from the china closet), a purple cloth (from her sister's dress up box), a silver star (from a necklace), and a jewel (from her mother's jewelry box—*hope she doesn't mind*). She arranged everything as the book directed, read over the words a few times, then took a deep breath. Three times she spoke the magic words, just as instructed. Now what? Nothing seemed different. There was no cloud of smoke or flash of light. *Remember, it's only make believe.* Her mom poked her head in the door.

Something's Fishy



The first thing Ava said when she arrived at her grandfather's summer lake house was, "Grandpa! Can I go swimming? I can really swim now. Can I? Will you come watch me?"

"Go swimming, huh? Well, I don't know," Grandpa responded hesitantly.

"What? Grandpa! I've really been looking forward to it!" Ava pleaded. "Pleeease?"

He coughed and looked uncomfortable. "Ava, that lake is . . . it might . . . I guess if I'm right there, but just tell me if you think . . . oh never mind! Sure, I'll come and watch you."

Next thing, Ava was galloping into the water while Grandpa sat in a lawn chair sipping a cold drink.

"Grandpa! Watch this!" She did a back somersault, and Grandpa smiled encouragingly. Then Ava dove deep, but instead of cool water down below, she felt warm water. *That's strange.* Coming up, she took a deep breath, and dove again. The water was definitely warm, almost like bath water,