The *Real* “Ready”

A tingle of expectation ran from my head to my toes, sending a sudden shiver through my whole body. It wasn’t the crisp autumn breeze that made me tremble, but the excitement that my small ten year old frame could barely contain. Finally it was here! The first day of school held almost more enchantment for me than the first day of summer vacation. Getting out of bed was no problem on this sort of day. I could hardly wait to put on the starchy new dress, white socks, and the sneakers that Mom had made me “save” for school. My book bag was standing neatly in the corner, ready with the new pencils and even *pens* that you need in *fifth* grade. I’ve always been a little OCD about “being ready” and this day was no exception. To add to the preparations, my school had already celebrated its induction ceremony for the first grade, the day before. This included the move up for the rest of us. Now I *really* was in the fifth grade, and ready to hit the road running. I couldn’t wait to find my desk, with the shiny laminated name place that would specify this area as *mine*. It would be the little haven where I could line up my pencils and pens neatly in a row, stack my books just so, and create my own little world. To my surprise and amazement, I was not as prepared for the new challenges of “upper school” as I thought I would be…especially this year, due to renovations.

Subsequently, our school was in shambles. All the classes had to use different rooms in different buildings. The teachers had done their best to make it new, fresh and welcoming, but they couldn’t hide the peeling carpet, paint chipping off the walls and lack of any normal classroom accessories. And would you believe it...the stairwell opened right up into our classroom, bringing the wafts of lunch cooking downstairs, along with the intrusion of everyone and anyone who had to access other floors of the building. But on the bright side, my teacher was Ms. Jessica. This year was going to be fun.

The fun began right away with the first touch of chalk to board. The whole blackboard gave a lurch, and to our surprise swung back to bump the wall behind! It was merely dangling from two chains in the ceiling! “We’ll have to find a way,” she said with a laugh, as she pushed a heavy chair up against the still undulating board. Grasping the chalk again, she wrote with the clear precision of someone who knows their business, “Two books, two book reports…each month.” The room seemed to reel. Could this be true? I rubbed my eyes and read it again. Sure enough! To my horror it was there, etched in white on the startling dark of the board. My world crashed around me. The childish joy of new clothes, pencils and books was shattered. That tangible scent of golden rod and asters that had so filled me with joy was now horribly morphed into a putrid odor, foreboding of gloomy winter to come. I couldn’t do it. I simply *couldn’t*! Never in all my life had I read even *one* book in a month, let alone two *with* written book reports. An instinctive sense of panic swept over me. Help! Get me out of here!

Ms. Jessica’s voice cut across my wild thoughts: “Judith, aren’t you going to choose your book?” While I had been sunk in my wave of despair, the rest of the class had all quietly and calmly gotten up, gone over to the shelf and chosen their first book for the month. I stumbled numbly from my seat and stood in front of the shelf. All the titles danced and swirled before my eyes, twisting themselves into terrible, laughing tongue twisters. The seconds dragged by. “Well, which one will it be,” asked Ms. Jessica, “Should I choose one for you?” I couldn’t even answer, but nodded and pointed to the spine that looked the thinnest. She pulled it off the shelf and said, “Here, you’ll like it. *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates*.”

So there I was on the first day of fifth grade with a reading and writing assignment looming over my head. That night at home I panicked again, but was met with little sympathy from Dad or Mom. “You buckle down and get it done. *You* know how to read.” And I did. Each day as I toiled my way along, and learned about Hans Brinker’s life in Holland, his sick father, and his dream of having a pair of ice skates all of his own, the strain lessened. Until suddenly, one day, I turned the page and I was done! There is nothing I can say to describe that feeling. I had done the impossible. Sure, I had known how to read since Kindergarten, but this was different. This was real. No longer was it the little *Magic Tree House* books that I could read as many or as few as I wished. This was *fifth* grade and it was an *assignment* with a deadline. When it came to the book report, I found that all I had to do was go chronologically through that book and write down the events as they had happened. It was easy. My panic was gone. As I stood with my book report in hand by Ms. Jessica’s desk, waiting for her attention, another little shiver ran through me. What would she say? With a smile she looked up and took the paper from my hand. “You did it. I knew all along that you could. Now tell me, did you like it?” I gulped and stammered “yes.”

Looking back, the rest of that year is a blur in my mind. I can’t even recall what the “second” book of the month was. It’s just that one September day that stands out crystal clear, where at the hands of my teacher, I had to face my enemy and defeat it. To this day, when I see a reading or writing assignment up on the board, a small tingle of panic grips at my heart, but then in the same moment it is subdued. Subconsciously, I know that I can do it. Though it still takes effort and a focus that I find hard to corral, when the pencil’s in my hand, the words will flow. With each new challenge to my literacy, a tingle of excitement still returns to me as it did on that first day of fifth grade. The difference is that now, even without the new shoes, I know I am *really* ready.

