

The Girl and the Magic Pencil

If you use her life as a starting point, the earth is coming up on its twelfth revolution around the sun. The young girl doesn't remember much about her first few years; young minds have other priorities, but right now, she is very aware of the ringing alarm clock beside her bed. Everyone knows that wake-up alarms never sound pleasant even if you awaken to a song you like, particularly on days like today when yours is set for six a.m.



Going to school can be fun, but getting up very early in the morning, especially when it is still dark outside isn't. Most of her neighborhood friends attend the same school, so when she gets there early, she can catch up with fun things like "girl talk" including all the cool stuff boys just simply cannot understand. That's what happens most of the time when her mom isn't running late, but there are exceptions . . . like the time her brother forgot to tell her that he "accidentally" stuffed half of yesterday's un-eaten peanut butter sandwich in his pants' pocket. Yes, *those* pants that she just threw into the washing machine! "But mom, I wasn't hungry and figured I'd eat it later." Younger brothers!

Today was going to be "one of those days." Before her alarm sounded, she was in the middle of a strange and unusual dream. This was not a typical dream by her standards, because most of her nighttime journeys into the world of imagination were pleasurable. Whenever her parents quietly looked into her room before they turned in for the night as most good parents do, her face always contained a smile as she slept. She doesn't dream every night, but when she does, those experiences are always enjoyable. The dream that ended so suddenly on this particular morning was different. She always dreams in color. This dream was in black and white.



At the sound of the alarm, the young girl seemed more disoriented than usual. It wasn't the music on the radio or the sound of her mother calling her name that was the central focus of her thoughts; it was the dream . . . that strange black and white dream. The early morning world around her seemed to be steeped in a heavy gray fog that was not dissipating quickly enough.

The details of her latest dream, while fresh in her head, were slow in coming as she tried to put together all of the details. There were images – lots of them, and it seemed as if some were trying to accelerate their move into her realm of consciousness. This intense concentration was broken by the sound of her mother’s voice.

“We are leaving in fifteen minutes, so get moving,” said her mother.

“OK, mom, I hear you!” she replied, knowing that the time frame wouldn’t be a problem. The evening before, she laid her school uniform neatly and carefully on the chair beside her bed. After a quick trip to the bathroom, she began to dress. Her body was in motion, but her mind was still trying to put all the



pieces of that mysterious dream together. As she was in the process of gathering her books, papers and school supplies, and placing them into her backpack, she had the distinct feeling that she had forgotten something. The next sound she heard was

the opening of the garage door. Mom’s taxi was about to leave, and a short tap of the horn let her know that she would be the last passenger.

A typical day . . . or was it?

Her mother slowed down as she approached the school. This time of the morning was always busy. Parents slowly pulled their cars into the drop-off area of the school zone, being extra careful not to hit any of the pedestrians who always seemed preoccupied. Once the car came to a stop, her mother turned to the young girl and said, “Remember, you have dance today.”

“Yes, mom, I know” she responded.

“We’ll get something to eat after that. I have to go back to my office to finish a few things, so I’ll pick you up right here.” said her mother.

Since the car door was open and the little girl was already on her way, her mother wasn’t sure just how much of what she had just said was actually heard and comprehended by her daughter as the door shut, but she knew she would be in the very same spot at 3:15 later that afternoon.

Like most new adventures, middle school was both challenging and different for the young girl. Being eleven years old and a sixth grader placed her among the newest group of students in her school. Even though they were almost a month into the new school year, there were still areas of the campus and parts of the building that were not yet familiar to her. Most modern schools could seem like intricate labyrinths, especially if you were a new student. Some of her classes were at opposite ends of where she needed to be, and that necessitated walking faster than normal in order to get there on time. The clock on the wall just changed to 7:57 a.m., and that meant she had less than three minutes to get to Ms. Signet’s classroom that was, by her calculations, two minutes and thirty seconds away.

Rounding yet another corner she lengthened her stride and picked up her pace. As she walked, she opened her backpack and reached for the assignment that was due today so she could simply place it on the teacher's desk before taking her seat. Her destination was in sight, even though it was the last classroom at the far end of the hall. She could still make it on time when all of a sudden . . . crash!



As result of the collision with another student who was in just as much of a hurry as she, books and papers flew into the air and landed haphazardly on the floor.

“Are you OK,” said the eighth grader to the young girl as they both slowly got to their feet.

“I . . . I think so. I’m sorry; I wasn’t watching where I was going. I just didn’t want to be late for my first

class,” she said.

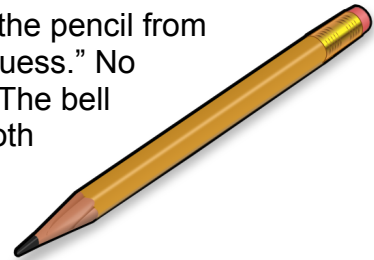
“Yeah, me too,” said the eighth grader. “My first period teacher is really strict and wants everyone seated when the bell rings.”

Hurriedly, both girls began sorting out their books and other belongings from the recently created clutter on the floor. In less than thirty seconds, just about everything was sorted out and picked up. It appeared that each girl had what was hers, with the exception of a single yellow pencil that remained on the floor at their feet.

“I think that’s yours,” the young girl said as she pointed to the lone object resting on the floor between them.

The eighth grader seemed to hesitate for a brief second, nodded her head, and looked directly at the young girl and said, “Maybe this happened because I was meant to give it to you. I don’t suppose I need it any more, and something tells me that you do.”

Looking a bit confused, the young girl slowly took the pencil from the eighth grader’s extended hand and said, “Thanks, I guess.” No sooner were those words spoken when reality kicked in. The bell was about to ring, and if nothing else crazy happened, both girls would be seated on time for their first class.



The “Pop Quiz”

Nothing is more un-nerving to an unsuspecting student than when a teacher says, “Clear your desks and take out a single sheet of paper. We’re having a pop quiz!” These words especially hit home if you came to class unprepared . . . or if you’re a straight A student who has an intrinsic fear of failing.

The young girl's crazy day was moving into another dimension of "Oh nooooo!" and it was barely after 8:00 a.m. A pop quiz on yesterday's lesson could turn into a disaster if the teacher asked the wrong questions.

It is difficult to know exactly what goes on inside a person's mind. This process is much more complicated when that individual is an eleven year-old girl who has a self-imposed set of standards few can understand. It wasn't always this way. Learning came easily for her. As a small child, she could hear a song and instantly begin singing along even though she might have only heard that song once before. She was the same with commercials on radio and television, often repeating them over and over during bath time to the amusement of her mother. In fact, the only subject that didn't come naturally to her was math. Somehow her genetic makeup made her a bit slower in that area, but not to the point that she was below average in any way, she just had to work a little harder in that subject.



Math was her first class of the day, and Ms. Signet had prepared a brief quiz to gauge the level of yesterday's lesson. It seemed that there were a more than just a few blank and confused faces at the end of class the day before, and as a good teacher, she didn't want to move ahead too quickly for fear of leaving some students behind.

If this were a normal day, the young girl would have been sure to review her notes from yesterday's class, and attempt to understand them as best she could. At least she would be somewhat prepared, but a quiz like this coming out of nowhere proved to be unnerving. The crazy dream the night before, her early morning personal "fog," the collision in the hallway, and now a pop quiz . . . she was slowly moving towards panic mode.

I hate surprises like this. My dad always tells me that I over-react to things that really aren't all that important, and that I should just calm down. He told me that the world will not end if I get a B. Well things like this do matter, and they especially matter to me. I can't fail this test!

As her mind raced through a number of random but related thoughts, her fingers begin searching her backpack for a pen. A mild sense of panic started to set in because her search was turning out to be futile. Now both of her hands were rummaging through the backpack looking for anything that she can use to take the test.

Oh no, in my rush to get out of the house this morning, I left my pens at home! Oh, here's something. Finally! . . . that yellow pencil the eighth grader gave me just a few minutes ago in the hallway.

The young girl never liked using pencils for classwork because unlike pens, their points needed to be sharpened periodically. Oh well, this morning, Ms. Signet would see her answers written in erasable gray.

Despite the bewildering start of the young girl's morning, the rest of the day was smooth and uneventful. She passed the "pop quiz" in math and that calmed her down significantly. Using a pencil for her classes didn't prove to be all that bad. Somehow, its point remained sharp despite the amount of writing she did for the remainder of her classes, and it felt surprisingly comfortable in her small hand.

Express Yourself

One of the things all creative minds have in common is the ability to see and perceive things at a different level. While the same external images are fed to the brain via our five senses, truly creative people are able to see, feel, and perceive much more than the average person. This becomes even more evident in the field of art where so much is open to speculation and interpretation.

Dance class was usually one of the most enjoyable parts of her day, especially if a particular class or lesson involved something creative. If one of her instructors said that they would be working on an interpretative project, she was definitely in! She had a way of "feeling" music in a way that at times transformed into grandiloquent moves that were graceful by anyone's standards. She was capable of accomplishing patterns and variations that most eleven-year old bodies simply couldn't complete. At dance she was in *her* element. There she combined her natural artistic grace with a competitive spirit that motivated her to be the best. It was this competitive drive that at times led her to work on certain moves and routines on her own and away from the main group of students. Motivation in this area was never a problem for the young girl. To her, dancing was not only something she loved, but it also served as an ideal way to relieve the stresses, anxieties, and tensions of a very complex eleven-year-old girl.

Competition

When you are good at something, the only way you can really know just how good you are is to compete. Dance is that way. When you are one of the better dancers at your academy, it's only natural for you to want to compete against the best dancers in your age group from other schools. In this area, there are no shortages of competitions ranging from solo, duo, group, and production numbers. Talented dancers are able to compete in several of these categories once they qualify. While each division has its own award structure, wherever you choose to compete translates into a proportionate amount of hard work and dedication in order to come out



on top. Within those categories are sub-divisions that include jazz, ballet, hip-hop, tap, and contemporary, and each has its own criteria for judging.

The young girl's solo routine seemed flawless "on paper." Her choreographer had included all of the elements that would score this routine on the high end of the spectrum, providing they were performed with agility, grace, and with near perfect timing. For weeks, the practice sessions consisted of working on all of the elements of the routine separately. There were times when the young girl executed them perfectly, but there were also sessions that ended in tears and frustration.

Time for bed

After weeks of preparation, the nearly exhausted young girl was sitting on the floor of her room, elbows on her knees with her palms supporting her chin, mentally reviewing all of the elements of her routine. While her memory precisely recalled every step along with the accompanying moves and gestures, she was very nervous. The big event was tomorrow, and she would have get up early and make the hour long ride to the competition with her mother.

There was a light tap on her door. It was her father. He waited a few seconds and knocked again. When he didn't get a response, he slowly opened the door. The music she was listening to grew louder as he entered. He saw that her back was to the door, and she appeared to be in her own world – her "bubble" as he often referred to her retreats into her small sanctuary.

"Big day tomorrow!" he said, "It's after ten and you should get some sleep."

"Oh, hi dad, I didn't hear you come in."

"Are you OK?" he slowly said. "You seem to be out there somewhere in your own world" as he bent down on one knee and kissed the top of her head. As he did so, he noticed that her eyes were moist, like she had been crying. "What's the matter?" he said softly as he sat beside her on the floor.

Hesitantly she began to answer, "I . . . I . . . don't know if I'm ready for my competition tomorrow. I don't think I can do it."

Her tears began to flow and her body started to quiver. Slowly, the uncertainty and self-doubt that was concealed somewhere deep inside began to surface. Why would it pick such an inopportune time to come out? One would think that after repeated successes, her solo dance routine would have become a simple matter of muscle memory reacting to the conditioned stimulus of her music.

Times like these are virtual nightmares for fathers. While they are capable of sympathy and a degree of understanding, it is virtually impossible to have complete empathy. Fathers can't simply step inside their daughter's dance shoes and walk that proverbial mile in them. Their size eleven feet simply won't fit!



They can try to understand, but chances are, the best they can do is offer advice and some much needed compassion.

Her dad reassured her that she would do fine and he kissed her again as he tucked her in for the night. He stood quietly at her bedside until he saw her eyes close and her breathing peacefully slow down. He turned and quietly left his now sleeping daughter in the soft glow of her night-light.

The Recurring Dream

It wasn't long before the young girl went through the five phases of sleep, arriving at the REM stage much quicker than usual. The REM stage is where dreaming occurs, and it is usually accompanied by rapid eye movement that stimulates dreaming. Again, like her dream the night before, the dazzling color arrays that were always part of her past dreams were lacking. There were blurred visions of figures moving about, none of their faces clearly recognizable, passing through her mind in rapid succession. A discord of music was also playing, but she knew none of the songs. This sequence continued for some time until she sprang upright in her bed, awakened by the confusion that had just gone on inside her head.



She was obviously disoriented and confused. Her breathing was rapid, as she sat there trying to calm herself. The digits on the clock beside her bed read 2:55 and somehow she knew that she wouldn't be able to simply lie down and go back to sleep.

What was that all about? I mean all of those people and that crazy music? Why am I having that same kind of dream two nights in a row?

So, she kicked out her feet, swung them around, and got out of bed. Knowing that she needed to calm herself down or she would be up the rest of the night, she walked to her desk, turned on the small light and looked for something to read.

Unfortunately, nothing in her collection of books appealed to her at the time, so she put her elbows on the desk and rested her head in her hands. She began to think. *Maybe I should write down what I remember. It just might make sense to somebody.*

On her desk was a blank drawing tablet. That would do because her notebook was still in her backpack. Strangely, the yellow pencil that she had used all day at school was also on the desk. *How did it get there? Oh well, let's see . . .*

Because she was fatigued and tired, her attempts at concentration became futile, her head began to nod and her eyes started to close. As she drifted into a state of semi-consciousness, something strange began to occur. The pencil that she had been holding in her hand seemed to move . . . slightly at first, and then gradually it began to take her hand on a strange and unusual journey.

The past is what we were. The future is what we will become.

It is never a good idea to fall asleep in a sitting position. Chairs are not beds and desktops are not pillows, and seldom do they lead to a restful sleep. This morning the young girl was awakened not by her alarm, but by a ray of sunshine that found its way through her window and into the corner of her eye. Waking up in this manner was sure to produce some form of uneasiness simply because people are not used to waking up like that.

As the sleep left her body and she slowly moved into the realm of consciousness, she became strangely aware of the drawing tablet on her desk that now contained an image . . . a drawing. That's strange because last night it was just a pad of blank pages. Now it contained a sketch of a girl who had a striking resemblance to her; only the sketch depicted a much younger child. Upon further inspection, there was no doubt in her mind that the drawing was of her, not the way she looks now, but the way she looked several years ago. But how did it get there?



I know I'm not totally awake, but that sure looks like me; not now, but when I was little, maybe when I was five.

At this point, she was alone in her room with nothing more than the drawing tablet and that yellow pencil from yesterday occupying her thoughts when she heard her mother's voice.

"Sweetheart, are you getting ready?" called her mother.

"Yes, mom, I'll be out in a minute" she replied. Not knowing what to do with the picture or the writing tablet, she picked it up, walked across the room, and slid it under her bed.

I'll figure all of this out later.

The Half Empty Glass

On the way to her dance competition, the young girl was uncharacteristically silent during the drive despite continued attempts by her mother to get her to talk. Perhaps her silence was masking something a bit deeper. Their usual mother-daughter chats about everything and anything just couldn't get started.

"You're deep in thought this morning," chirped her mother as she gave the young girl a look of motherly concern. "Is something bothering you? Care to talk about it?"

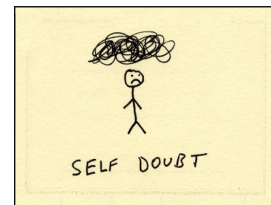
She hesitantly replied, "No, mom, nothing is bothering me. I'm just very nervous about my routine today."

Her mother seemed taken back by that remark and said, "But honey, I've seen you do that number for the past month in your practice sessions and it's absolutely perfect."

"Sure, mom, that's easy for you to say. I'm the one who has to make sure I'm in the exact spot every time and make the right moves. I have to smile and remember to elevate and . . . well, you know, I'm just not allowed to make a mistake because everyone is watching!" and with those words, she looked down to her lap and began to cry.

When your daughter begins to have an emotional meltdown in your car, you have little choice but to pull over, get out of the flow of traffic, and become an amateur psychologist. Nobody said that parenting would be easy. No child comes with an instruction manual, especially for times like these when there needs to be a delicate balance between patience and "TLC."

Hugs do wonders, but how long do those results last? Before they knew it, they were at the competition and standing in line for their check-in.



The Competition

Waiting is the hardest part. It gives you time to think . . . and to doubt. Any event that involves a form of subjective scoring leaves room for interpretation. Gymnastics, ice-skating, ski jumping, diving, boxing, and yes, dancing all rely on this method of evaluating its competitors. While judges are well schooled in the compulsory elements of these sports, the human eye still has flaws. All performers start with close to a "perfect" score, and that number is then decreased incrementally as certain elements are completed.

Regional dance competitions are big. They attract thousands of dancers; many from hundreds of miles away, to compete in these highly structured sessions. Because they cater to a number of age groups, they can take on the atmosphere of a three-ringed circus. Action is everywhere.

If body language was the criteria for scoring, the young girl would finish somewhere near the bottom. Her usually confident mannerism and smile outwardly had lost the battle to uncertainty and lack of confidence. As the time for her solo event drew near, the confidence she exuded during her dozens of practice sessions had not yet surfaced. This is never a good sign. During her warm-ups, she replayed her routine, step-by-step, move-by-move. It was perfect. Nothing was missing. If anything, her body would know what to do as the music played.

I don't know why I'm so nervous. I've done this routine so many times I can practically do it in my sleep. Stay calm. Breathe. Relax. That's what my mother always tells me when she sees that I'm nervous. Stay calm!

The three minutes seemed to fly by. To those in the audience, her routine went extremely well. Her steps and moves were perfectly synchronized with her music. But *she* knew. A slight hesitation before her second jump, her chase's



triple step pattern was a bit short, and her smile . . . that smile all judges require in order to get maximum scores was sporadic. While her score was good, it wasn't good enough to win. Others with similar talent and routines had performed better that day. Despite the praise, support, and encouragement from her mother, it was a very long ride home.

Disappointment and Frustration

When they arrived home after the competition, the young girl wanted nothing more than to retreat to the sanctuary of her room. It was there that she could be by herself and sort out what went wrong. She had received words of praise and encouragement from not only her dance instructors and fellow dancers, but from both of her parents as well, but when you haven't reached your twelfth birthday, statements from adults with themes of "you can always build on today" and "this will make you stronger" weren't expressions she wanted to hear.

Everyone is telling me that I did fine. Well, I didn't do fine. They say I was nervous. Yes, I was nervous, and I guess it showed. The judges knew that and when I made even the slightest mistake, they saw it! I guess I'm not good enough to do this. Maybe if I stay in here alone, I don't have to prove anything to anybody.

One Month Later

The young girl's crazy dream patterns were not as frequent, but when she dreamed something worth remembering, those particular images were becoming clearer and easier to remember. Memories of her "sub-par" performance at her last competition were slowly fading, but they were not completely forgotten. They acted as a motivation factor. She continued to work on her dance routines, and with her instructor's help even added some degree of difficulty to her solo. At

school, she made some new friends, two of whom also took dance classes at the same academy. Her first middle school report card included an A in every subject.

For the past thirty days, the young girl kept that yellow pencil with her for school and on her desk when she was at home. She secretly wondered when its point would need sharpening. She had used it many times and for a number of projects and the point was still as sharp as ever. She would also get down on her knees, reach under her bed, and pull out the drawing tablet with the black and white sketch of a younger version of herself, still wondering how it was made. On this particular evening, she crawled up on her bed and propped her back up against the headboard and cushioned it with her pillow. With the tablet on her knees, she stared at the picture and as she did so, her eyes slowly began to close. Within minutes, she was traveling on a journey to another dream.

When the young girl awoke, she noticed that she was holding that yellow pencil in her hand. *I don't remember taking it off my desk last night.* As she stretched her arms skyward to chase what remained of last night's sleep from her body, her eye caught sight of the writing tablet that was still cradled on her knees. She looked down at the tablet. The page with the drawing was not on the top; that page was pulled up and relegated to the back of the pad. Something else was in its place. Written in bold script, was a note that took up almost the entire page . . .



Upon seeing the page containing the note, a strange feeling came over her. Like the drawing of the younger girl on that same tablet, how did it get there? *Did I write that? It looks like some kind of a message. Are those words meant for*

me? That's strange. Those are the exact words my parents and some of my teachers have said to me lately. Do others see something in me that I don't?

So, this day began for the young girl with a new challenge. Exactly where it came from wasn't important. What was important was that the message was delivered. The words were clear . . . Believe in yourself!

Success can come in a number of ways. When you excel in certain areas, others will recognize those accomplishments. Hard work and dedication doesn't always guarantee success. To some, succeeding in academics or athletics comes easily. They can succeed with a minimum of effort while others have to work hard just to keep pace. The young girl's genetic makeup contained some of both elements. While she was very intelligent, she still had to work hard to get an A in all of her subjects. The same was true for her dance routines. She couldn't slack off in either area.

That morning, the skies brought rain. The young girl learned to love the sound of raindrops falling on the trees and grass outside her window. They had a soothing effect on her. She remembered back to a time when clouds and rain made her sad. On those days, she couldn't go outside and to play with her friends. She was confined indoors and had to occupy herself. Those days were never fun for her. Somehow that "glass half empty" feeling disappeared about the same time she began enjoying rainy days. Perhaps it was her realization that even unpleasant things in life are temporary. Even clouds run out of rain. The sun will eventually come out and shine brightly. She was learning to see the good in things, even if it were temporarily hidden behind a layer of clouds.

On the way to school, she was strapped into her seat in the front while her younger brother was in the back seat of "mom's taxi," when a song came on the radio. Her mother liked to vary the type of music she listened to in the car, and there were times she would listen to the Eighties Station on the radio. This was where the push button was this morning.

"Mom, do we have to listen to this old-person station?" said the young girl. "Some of that stuff is putting me to sleep."

Her mother replied, "Do you ever listen to the words of the songs or is your mind just closed to really good music? I happen to like Jimmy Buffett."

"Who is Jimmy Buffett?" said her brother from the back seat as he looked up from his ever-present video game.

"Jimmy Buffet is an artist and a songwriter who started writing and performing when I was young and he still sells out concerts today. He writes songs with meaningful words, not just a bunch of computer aided techno sounds." And with that, she turned up the volume on the current song, *It's My Job*.



*If street sweepers can smile then
I've got no right to feel upset
But sometimes I still forget
Till the lights go on and the stage is set
And the song hits home and you feel that sweat*

*It's my job to be different than the rest
and that's enough reason to go for me
It's my job to be better than the best
and that's a tough break for me*

Sometimes things just “click.” Perhaps it was the fact that the volume was turned up and the words of that Jimmy Buffett song hit home, but something seemed to turn on that proverbial light bulb in the young girl’s head. It didn’t take much, but the references to “*Till the lights go on and the stage is set,*” and “*It’s my job to be different than the rest and that’s enough reason to go for me. It’s my job to be better than the best*” made her think.

That could be me.

Motivation works in strange ways. When that light bulb goes on inside your head, suddenly lots of things begin to make sense. Things that didn’t seem related now click. When you are young, what is important to you changes almost every week. When you move towards maturity, things that are important remain important.

The clearest dream and the sharpest picture . . .

That evening, the young girl was sitting at her desk. It was getting late, and she had just finished her homework when she picked up that yellow pencil and held it in her hand. Lately she was feeling good about herself and her new sense of purpose. Focusing on single goals and individual tasks was never an issue; seeing how all of the pieces fit together in the big picture was. Call it a step in maturity, but sitting there with the drawing tablet in front of her and the yellow pencil in her hand, suddenly she felt like she was in control.

Despite what some people say, you can daydream at night. Your mind is capable of contemplating a number of “what if” scenarios. That’s how creative and artistic people think. They can move into a surreal world and see how things might appear in a situation that presently is not real and might not happen. She often dreamed of dancing under the bright lights and in front of a large audience. Those dreams also included brief visions of her springing from the ground and performing moves that only a few dancers can do and exiting to a standing ovation. As she began to lose herself in this illusion, her hand began to move.

Still gripping that yellow pencil, it moved in a series of lines and patterns that eventually produced a glimpse into her future.



Ten months later

The beginning of every school year is filled with anticipation and optimism. This was the case for the young girl. She was entering her second year of middle school, and that meant that her class of seventh graders was no longer at the bottom of the heap. That distinction now belonged to the new sixth graders. The routine was the same. Her mother slowed down as she approached the school and the drop-off area. As the car came to a stop, her mother turned to her daughter and said, "Remember, you have dance today."

"Mom, you sound like a recording. You tell me the same thing every day." the young girl replied with a half-smile on her face. Giggling, she said, "The next thing you're going to say is, 'I'll pick you up right here at 3:15.'"

Her mother had to laugh at that response. "Riiiiight. You're in a great mood, considering it's the first day of school. Have fun, and remember . . ."

Interrupting, her daughter said, "Yes, I know, and don't be late. Bye mom!" And with that, she grabbed her backpack and sprang out of the car busily scanning the mass of students at the school's entrance for any of her friends.

On the first day of school, the hallways are always crowded. Since everyone has a new schedule, maneuvering towards your first class can be an adventure, even if you're a seventh grader who has had a year of practice. This year, her locker was located in a good spot. It was practically in the center of the main building, and that meant she could access it several times a day without going out of her way. This morning, she was ahead of schedule. Her first class wasn't for another ten minutes, so she decided to go to her locker and arrange it to her liking. When she arrived at her locker, she noticed three older girls quickly gather their things and move away. Strange. Then she heard a sequence of sounds . . . a snuffle at first, and then the distinct sound of someone crying. Looking down, she saw a little girl, a new sixth grader, sitting on the floor with her face buried in her hands.

Being a "big sister" was a role that was familiar to the young girl. She was two years older than her brother and accepted that role as counselor and sometime advisor. Seeing the girl on the floor crying, she subconsciously slipped into that role.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asked as she dropped to one knee and put her hand on the girl's shoulder.

The sixth grader, startled at first by the young girl's touch, slowly looked up through tear-filled eyes and said, "They were making fun of my braces. They called me 'brace face' and then they all started laughing and making faces at me."



“Hey, I just had my braces taken off over the summer and my teeth are really straight now,” replied the young girl. “They called me things like ‘metal mouth’ and ‘tin grin,’ and it used to bother me a lot. Now when I look in the mirror and see my perfectly straight teeth, I know that it was worth it. How much longer do you have to wear them?”

“I was supposed to have them off last month in time for middle school, but the orthodontist said I needed another three to four months for everything to be right” she said. “I just knew the older kids would make fun of me here.”

“Hey, what do they know? You’ll be fine here. You just need to believe in yourself.” *Wow! I can’t believe I’m giving advice to someone who could have been me a year earlier.* “I was afraid to smile because people would see my braces. Think about how awesome you’ll look in a few months.”

Perhaps this “chance” meeting was meant to happen and these two girls were destined to meet. Like the hallway collision with the eighth grader the year before, sometimes a sense of order and purpose can come from confusion.

As the two girls stood in the hallway, the sixth grader got to her feet and her mouth appeared to form the beginning of a smile as she said, “Thanks, you made me feel better.”

The young girl returned the smile and intuitively reached into her backpack. Her hand quickly found that yellow pencil that had been a part of her life for almost a year. While she wasn’t entirely sure how much of a role it played in her new and confident self, she was certain that somehow it helped her get there. Yes, it enabled her to realize that the confidence she seemed to lack was actually inside her all that time. She turned to the sixth grader and placed the pencil in her hand.

“Why are you giving me this?” said the younger girl.

With a wink and a smile, the young girl replied, “You’ll know.”

