

Words That Start With

A large, hand-drawn style letter 'B' with a thick black outline and a textured, shaded interior.

by VIKKI vANSICKLE

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For My Parents

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Before

In grade seven your life is supposed to change forever. At least, it does if you're a student at Ferndale Public School. That's the year you spend in Miss Ross's class, if you're lucky. If you're not, you end up in 7A with Mrs. White and spend the whole year wishing you were in Miss Ross's class. The kids in 7A pretend they don't care, saying the A stands for A+, but you can just as easily say that the B in 7B stands for better or best, and that would be the truth. There is no reason why some kids end up in 7A and some in 7B; it's just one of those cosmic mystical things that is decided by the universe. I hope I'm on her good side this year.

Benji

I'm not the only one who loves Miss Ross. Ferndale students spend their entire lives waiting to be in her class. She always does the coolest stuff. Last year her students adopted a whale, and they decorated the display case in the front hall with pictures of it and facts on whales and how they are becoming endangered. Or some of them are. I don't remember exactly what the reports said because mostly I was looking at the pictures. They adopted a beluga whale named Aurora. Beluga whales are totally white and they look like they are always smiling. I guess no one told them about the icebergs melting and all the oil spills that are wrecking the environment.

The year before that Miss Ross's class planted a school garden where the old playground used to be before they tore it down because it was unsafe. They turned an old muddy patch of land into a wild flower garden, complete with a bird bath and a pathway to walk on. Miss Ross was always doing things like that. And now I was finally in grade seven and about to be in Miss Ross's class — I hoped. What sort of project would my class be taking on? Maybe she was planning it right now. Maybe she was staying up late, putting the finishing touches on a big presentation.

I could hardly wait for next week to come.

There is only one person in the whole world who is feeling as anxious as I am right now. He just so happens to be my best friend. The phone barely rings before it's picked up.

“Hello?”

“Benji?”

“Hi, Clarissa.”

“What do you think Miss Ross is planning for us this year?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out on Tuesday.”

“Well I can’t wait that long.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I was thinking maybe we could call the school.”

“Why?”

“To ask Miss Ross.”

There is a long pause, which means Benji is trying to find a way to say he thinks I am crazy. I have known him for five years and I know what every single one of his pauses means.

“What would you say?” he finally asks.

“I don’t know; maybe I could pretend to be a parent and just ask.”

“Why couldn’t you just ask her as yourself?”

Honestly. That Benji. I explain myself as patiently as possible, which I admit isn’t very patient. “*Because* teachers never tell kids that kind of stuff. They want us to wait and see. But I bet she’d tell a parent. Teachers are obligated to tell parents that kind of thing.”

“But won’t she recognize your voice?”

“Not if I disguise it,” I point out.

Benji is not convinced.

“I guess,” he says.

“So are you going to come over?”

“Now?”

“Yes, now. We have to practise the phone call if we want it to sound good.”

“We?”

“I’m hanging up now, Benji.”

“Okay, I’m coming.”

Benji has lived next door for as long as I have lived here, but I never really noticed him until the day his father dragged him over to get his hair trimmed and forgot about him. He said he was going to run an errand, and one errand turned into three and then he met some friends for lunch downtown at Good Times. So Benji stayed over for the rest of the day. Before that he was just the weird, skinny kid who stared out the window but never came outside, and who scurried to school in the mornings, like maybe if he moved fast enough no one would see him.

Mom gave him the royal treatment — scalp massage, a glass of chocolate milk, shampoo consultation — even though he was only seven and none of that stuff means anything to a seven-year-old. Especially a boy. But Benji isn’t like other boys. He loved it and asked all sorts of questions. He wanted to smell all the products and touch all her brushes and combs. Mom was in heaven. At least until her next client showed up and she shooed him into the living room to play with me.

Benji is the kind of kid who has been teased his whole life: small, scrawny and kind of girly. He always has his nose in a magazine and hangs on the sidelines while the other boys team up for basketball. At least, he’s girlier than I am, which isn’t saying much since I hate dressing up and could care less about stupid teen magazines. You would think having a mother who owned a hair salon would have made me hair crazy and fashion conscious, but I told her ages ago she’d better

find someone else to leave the Hair Emporium to, because the minute I'm done high school I'm going to Hollywood to become an actress. I'll be famous, and all those people who made fun of me or underestimated me will be sorry they weren't nicer to me. They'll turn on their TVs at the end of the day to see me walk across the stage to accept my Oscar, while they sit on the couch in their pyjamas eating Cheezies.

Benji has already offered to be my stylist. When you're famous, it's good to have people you can trust working for you. They are less likely to sell your diaries to a tabloid or go on late-night talk shows and blab all about your love life. Benji would never do that. Plus he's pretty good at doing hair. Mom says he has the gift of gentle hands and I have to agree with her. Sometimes between clients Mom will teach him how to do a new updo or the correct way to blow someone's hair out straight. Benji practises on me and he never pulls too hard or jabs me with a bobby pin, which is more than I can say for my mother, who has been known to yank so hard that I get tears in my eyes. And she's supposed to be the professional.

Benji used to get picked on pretty bad, which is one of the reasons we became friends. He'd come home snivelling away and my mother would run out screaming blue murder at the boys who'd knocked him down. She'd take him by his hand and march him right into the salon, where she'd sit him down and sponge away the blood and dirt. Afterwards she'd mix up a special batch of foundation to cover the bruising. Sometimes she'd sweep a little blush on his cheeks to give him "a healthy glow." I guess she figured if it looked like Benji got out once in awhile the kids would think he was a healthy, robust kid who could handle himself in a fight. Poor Benji went from being the wimpy kid to the weirdo kid who wore makeup. But it didn't seem to

bother him much — didn't stop him from hanging around the salon, asking my mother all sorts of questions about her hair care line. Ever since then we've walked home together and somewhere along the way we became best friends.

Faking a phone call is a lot harder than faking a signature. With a signature you can put a piece of tissue paper over a sample of handwriting and trace it a few times until you get the hang of it. Plus, you can always do it in pencil and then trace over it in pen when you get it just right. You only have one chance for a phone call, so you have to get it right the first time. Also, you can't say "like" and "um" all the time. You have to lower your voice and know the right questions to ask.

"Okay, let's practise one more time. You be the school, I'll be the parent."

Benji sighs. "Okay."

"Ring, ring."

"Hello?"

"Benji, you have to say the name of the school."

"Right. Ferndale Public School."

I put on my best bossy Mom voice. "Yes, hello. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"Mrs. Davis, secretary."

"Good day, Mrs. Davis. I would like to speak to a Miss Ross."

"Okay."

"Benji! You didn't ask me who I was!"

"Sorry," Benji apologizes. "Who are you?"

"My name is Annie Delaney and I am a parent of a student at the school."

"Please hold, Mrs. Delaney."

"It's Miss Delaney. I'm not married."

Benji's eyes widen.

"Do you really think she'd say that? She'd correct Mrs. Davis?"

"Of course she would. Mom corrects everybody. It has to be believable."

Finally, after three practice rounds, I'm ready to give it a go. I make Benji go upstairs and find something for us to eat while I make the phone call. I can't have him distracting me while I'm in character.

The phone seems to ring for an awfully long time before there's a click and Mrs. Davis picks up.

"Ferndale Public School."

This is it! I take a deep breath and speak in my calmest voice.

"Yes, good day, I was wondering if I could speak with a Miss Ross."

"I'm sorry, the staff have left for the day."

"Oh, of course," I think quickly. "Well my name is Annie Delaney and I am just calling to, uh, confirm, that my daughter, Clarissa Louise Delaney, has indeed been placed in 7B."

"One moment, please."

Mrs. Davis puts me on hold. My heart seems to throb in time with the beeping sound the phone makes while I wait. I hold the receiver away from my mouth and take deep breaths. Benji comes down the stairs, a giant freezie in each hand.

"Well?" he whispers.

"I'm on hold," I hiss. "Don't look at me! You'll mess me up!"

Benji looks around for some place to hide.

"Where do you want me to go?" he asks.

"Thank you for holding, Mrs. Delaney—"

"It's Miss," I insist, turning my back on Benji.

"Miss Delaney," Mrs. Davis repeats. "I see here that Clarissa will be in 7B."

It's all I can do to keep from whooping and hollering, but I regain my composure and think calmly, like an adult. In my most polite voice I ask, "Might I enquire if a Benjamin Denton will also be in that class? I told his father, David Denton, that I would check for him."

There is another pause; I can just picture Mrs. Davis with her poufy bangs and clip-on earrings running a long pink fingernail down the list of names.

"Let me see, yes, Benjamin Denton will also be in 7B."

"Oh that's just, I mean, we're very excited. Thank you very much, Mrs. Davis."

I hang up before she can ask me any more questions. When I turn around Benji is grinning, his lips stained blue from the freezie.

"We're in!" I shout.

Benji thrusts a freezie at me and we start jumping up and down, sucking on our freezies and laughing like maniacs. Mom sticks her head out from the salon and frowns at us.

"What's gotten into you two?" she asks. "You're awfully cheerful for two kids who are going back to school on Tuesday."

"I wish it was Tuesday tomorrow," I gush.

Mom looks at me like I've gone a little insane, and maybe I have.

"Now I know you've gone crazy," she says.

I ignore her. "This is going to be my year, I know it!" I hold up my freezie and say, "A toast!"

Benji lifts his freezie up and repeats, "A toast!"

"To Miss Ross!"

"To Miss Ross!" Benji says.

We down the rest of our freezies and collapse on the floor, suffering from too much excitement and wicked-bad brain freeze.