

MORE THAN A PEST

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Sixteen stories for
young adolescents



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*For my children—
may you continue to love stories as much as I do.*

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More Than a Pest

“Hey, Aubrey!” Shawn’s voice below the tree house sounded excited.

I pulled myself on my elbows to the top of the ladder and peeped over. “What?” I called back. Shawn stood at the bottom of the ladder, swinging his slingshot wildly around him.

“Guess what, sis!” He was out of breath. “I just came from the woods, and I saw a raccoon up there! It’s curled up in a hollow log. You need to come see it!”

I squinted down at him. *A raccoon? In a hollow log?* “What’s it doing?” I sat up, closed my book, and swung my legs over the ladder.

Shawn was still dancing a little jig under the tree. “It’s sleeping! But if it wakes up, it might leave. You need to

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hurry!” He scuttled away toward the house. “I’m going to get Mom.” Before long he reappeared with Mom behind him. We followed him back the field lane to the woods, leaves crunching under our feet.

“So, you say it’s just sleeping?” Mom questioned.

“Yes,” Shawn said. “I was really quiet so I wouldn’t wake it up.”

We stumbled through the woods, and Shawn led us on a twisted path up the mountainside. Briars tugged at my dress and reached to slap my cheeks, but finally we stopped near an old log. Shawn turned around, a finger to his lips. Mom and I waited expectantly as he bent and peered into the opening. His eyes were bright when he turned around. “He’s still here!”

Mom and I inched closer. Sure enough, tucked in the bottom of the hollow tree was a sleeping raccoon. It didn’t even stir when I accidentally crunched on a stick.

Mom took a second look. “It seems strange that it doesn’t wake up. I wonder . . .” She looked closer. “Hmm, Shawn, do you think it’s alive?”

“What? You think it’s dead?” Shawn grabbed a stick and went back to the hole.

“See, when I watch its chest, I don’t see any movement,” Mom pointed out.

Shawn carefully poked the furry object. Nothing happened. Then he plunged his hand into the hole and dragged out the stiff body. “I guess it is dead,” he admitted, embarrassed. “I just thought it was sleeping.”

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"That's okay. It was hard to tell in that dark hole," Mom said. "I'm still glad you brought us up to see it."

A laugh bubbled up inside me, and I didn't try to hide it. "A dead raccoon! Seriously, you don't know when an animal is dead or alive?"

Shawn just stood there, poking at the dead animal. Now that it was in the light, it was easy to see that some of its fur was eaten away and it was . . . well, smelly. I couldn't help laughing some more. "Won't this be great to tell Dad!"

Shawn shot me a dark look before we turned to go down the trail. As we neared the house, Mom said quietly, "Aubrey, it's okay to laugh about the raccoon but not at Shawn, understand?"

I nodded, wiped my eyes, and headed to the tree house to retrieve my book. Brothers!



The next day after breakfast, Mom had a reminder for us children. "Conrad and Diane and their children are stopping in for lunch today. It would be nice if you'd have all your schoolwork done before they get here."

I hurried to my desk and opened the top.

"What are we going to do this afternoon?" Shawn asked as we flipped to our math lessons.

I bit back a sigh. Conrad and Diane didn't have any boys Shawn's age, which meant he would tag along with Ella and Carla and me. "I don't know; I thought maybe kickball. But they'll probably want to ride the Gator too."

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After lunch, Dad gave me permission to take my friends on one Gator ride. We climbed on, Ella and Carla and I on the front seat, Shawn on the back. We bumped across the field, laughing as the fall air filled our lungs and whipped our hair.

Suddenly Shawn shouted, “Hey, Aubrey, stop! My cap flew off!”

I glanced at him over my shoulder, annoyed. “I don’t feel like stopping right now. Just wait until I turn around and go back.”

We made a wide U-turn at the end of the field. As we neared the area where Shawn had lost his cap, I spotted the red. Jokingly, I swerved toward it. The girls laughed, then began to squeal, “Drive over it! Drive over it!”

I felt a faint uncertainty. That wouldn’t be nice, would it? But then I got caught up in the moment and laughed as I pressed harder on the gas.

“Drive over it!” chanted the girls.

We buzzed over the cap, flattening it in the mud. As I looked back, I was suddenly sickened by the sight of Shawn’s face. He didn’t say anything.

All too soon it was time for Ella and Carla to go home. Shawn and I were left, walking to the chicken house to pack eggs. When we walked past the field, I hardly dared to look if his cap was still there. There it was, flat and muddy, lying in the middle of the field, ruined. Shawn didn’t even look at it.

The incident stung my conscience. “Sorry about that,” I said hesitantly. “They said I should drive over it, but I know I shouldn’t have.”

Shawn just shrugged.

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“Is anyone going with me to the farm supply open house today?” Dad asked a few mornings later. Shawn and I popped our hands into the air.

Mom smiled. “I think I will stay home with the little ones this time.”

Dad nodded, then turned to us. “I plan to leave at eleven-thirty. Please be ready promptly.”

I hurried through my schoolwork. Open houses were always fun. There was usually free candy, not to mention ice cream.

A few hours later, we followed Dad through the crowd of farmers. While Dad stopped and talked to someone he knew, I spotted a table by the wall. Various items that promoted the company covered the black tablecloth. Shawn and I wandered over to look.

“This is neat,” I said, pointing to a white water bottle. It was just the kind I had been wanting, with a screw-on lid. I imagined what it might look like if I covered the company logo with a pretty watercolor sticker.

Shawn thumbed through a stack of caps. “Do you think we each can take something?”

“I wish someone would be here so we could ask.” Dad beckoned us then, and I felt a wave of disappointment. “I guess we won’t be able to find out. It’s time to get lunch.”

After we’d eaten, we made our way to the front of the store, where Dad paid for his purchases. “Shawn and I are going to the back to help carry the gates out,” Dad said to me. “You can head out to the truck.”

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As I walked to the door, I noticed the black-clothed table again. The shiny water bottle was still there, as if waving to me. A woman standing behind the table caught my gaze.

“Would you like to choose something?” she asked.

“Sure,” I replied. “Thanks!” This wouldn’t be a hard decision. I reached past a jar of pencils and curled my fingers around the water bottle. It felt smooth and new in my hands, unblemished by any scratches or dents. *Too bad Shawn isn’t here to get something*, I thought.

Then I noticed the stack of caps, and two pictures flashed unbidden through my mind. Shawn standing dejected by the raccoon, while I laughed. Shawn walking past the field, his cap smashed and torn in the back-ground. *But I get to choose, don’t I?* Besides, the water bottle was already in my hand. I backed away from the table.

“You decided on the water bottle?” The woman smiled at me.

Suddenly I took a jerky step forward. “Well, um, actually, no. Can I get this cap instead?”

“Why, sure! Take whatever you like.”

I slowly placed the water bottle back on the table. I took one last look at it. It was so perfect.

Then I snatched up the cap. With a smile at the lady, I walked through the door. Shawn was climbing into the truck. As he noticed what I was carrying, surprise crossed his face. I was reminded of how much I cared about him, even if he did have strange ideas sometimes. He was my brother, and not someone to be belittled,

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mocked, or treated the way I had been treating him recently.

I loved him, and in a minute, I would place the cap in his hands.

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Nothing but Empty Boxes

“Do you think Uncle Ed’s family will come for Christmas?” Claudia laid down her scissors and placed three more squares on the stack of patches. She looked across the table at her younger sister Leah.

Leah shrugged as she unfolded a piece of fabric.

“Just imagine all the fun we could have with the cousins,” Claudia continued, her tone wistful. “Skating on the pond until late at night while Dad and Uncle Ed keep the fire going . . .”

“And making Christmas cookies with lots of sprinkles,” Leah added.

Claudia nodded as she rubbed at a black marker stain on her fingertip. She could almost smell the wood-smoke from the bonfire and feel the sting of frosty air on her cheeks.

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The phone rang, and both girls looked up at the black phone base by the laundry room door. "Call from Ed Martin," the caller ID announced in its electronic voice.

Claudia dropped her marker. *How's that for timing?*

"It's Aunt Carolyn!" Leah shot from her chair, but just then Mom entered the kitchen.

Mom picked up the handset. "Hi, Carolyn," she said warmly as she slipped into the laundry room.

The girls picked up their markers again. Leah leaned across the table for another scrap of fabric, which brought her closer to the laundry door. "I think Mom is asking about Christmas," she whispered.

Claudia looked at the closed door, longing to be a little fly on the other side. Her eyes lit on a pitcher of water left on the counter. Yes, she needed a drink! She crossed the room in quiet steps and lingered at the counter after she poured a glassful. Leah joined her, suddenly thirsty as well.

"Yes, that will work." Mom had moved closer to the door, her voice clearer now. "I'll talk to Paul about it." *About what?* Claudia strained to hear more, but Mom was saying good-bye and inching the door open with her foot.

Both girls concentrated on putting their cups in the sink as Mom placed the handset in its base. "How are you coming with the patches?" she asked.

Claudia slid back into her chair and held up her stack. "Did Aunt Carolyn want to talk about Christmas?"

Mom smiled and paused on her way out of the kitchen. "Yes, she did. But I'd like to verify plans with Dad first. I'll let you know after we discuss it."