

# **THE EYE OF THE STORM**

**AN ALGONQUIN  
PARK ADVENTURE STORY**

WRITTEN BY  
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Note for Librarians: a cataloguing record for this book that includes Dewey Decimal Classification and US Library of Congress numbers is available from the Library and Archives of Canada. The complete cataloguing record can be obtained from their online database at:

<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/index-e.html>

The Eye of the Storm – Book

ISBN 0-9736492-2-4

The Eye of the Storm (eBook)

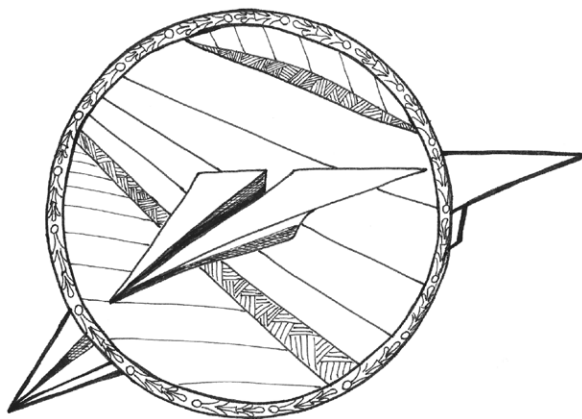
ISBN 0-9736492-3-2

The Eye of the Storm (CD-Rom)

ISBN 0-9736492-4-0

Editor: Kathy Kehrl: A freelance copyeditor and writer that may be found at: [www.TheFlawlessWord.com](http://www.TheFlawlessWord.com)

Interior Design by: Digital Dragon Designery  
([www.digitaldragondesignery.com](http://www.digitaldragondesignery.com))



## CHAPTER ONE

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# INJUSTICE

Johnny found himself in a far-off galaxy, deep within enemy territory. Pursued by many enemy-fighter squadrons, he was forced into a dense asteroid field. The only way out was to blast through them. Exploding rocks grazed his spaceship as his lasers cut through the massive space boulders. As he pushed forward, Johnny kept one eye on the ridged spheres of chaos before him and the other eye on the enemy fire from behind. Narrowly dodging and weaving to thwart impending doom, Johnny could not lose awareness for even a millisecond; the human race depended on his full alertness. Then he was struck. He was not hit by the enemies that were tailing him from behind nor did he crash into the asteroids that were grazing his spaceship; Johnny was struck by reality.

The paper airplane he had built earlier in the day mysteriously took to flight. The space scene transformed into Mrs. Churney writing on the blackboard: Things to Remember: No Cans or Bottles! Footwear, Clothing, Sleeping Bag. The grind of chalk hitting the blackboard was the only sound piercing the classroom, save the quiet snickering over what was about to happen.

The paper airplane did a perfect loop before landing upon Mrs. Churney's desk. Spurred by momentum, it kept gliding along the surface until its pointed nose ran right into her backside. Her fingers opened in response and the chalk fell into the metal tray at the base of the blackboard. The tension of the room broke and all of the kids laughed. When Mrs. Churney turned to confront the mischief-maker, her face was beet red with anger and embarrassment. She grabbed the paper airplane, crumpled it slowly in her hand, and threw it in the garbage. "Johnny, go to the principal's office!" she ordered. "Your antics are becoming tiresome, young man."

"But—" Johnny stammered in response.

"Now!" she shouted.

Intimidated by the harshness of her voice, all the other kids immediately went back to taking notes from the blackboard. Johnny slowly rose from his seat and made his way toward to door. Mitch, the sneaky troublemaker sitting behind Johnny, saw an opportunity and stuck his foot out as Johnny passed his desk. Not seeing it, Johnny stumbled and almost fell flat on his face. The kids snickered once again.

When Johnny arrived at the office, the principal, Mr. McIver, scolded him for a long time. This wasn't the first time Johnny had been sent to the principal's office. This was, however, the first time he was getting in trouble for something he didn't do. When he tried to explain this fact, the principal just yelled louder. Finally, Johnny couldn't take it any longer and lashed out, "You are...you're stupid!"

He was sent home instantly.

As he walked in the door, Johnny's mother was already on the phone.

"Yes, Mr. McIver, I understand. Thank you for calling. Good-bye."

Johnny shouted, "Mom, it wasn't—"

"Johnny, I'm very angry right now," his mother responded, without raising her voice. "I need to calm down for a few minutes then we will talk about this. Okay?"

“Yes,” Johnny sheepishly replied. He felt a little better that his mother hadn’t yelled at him. Still, he knew he was in big trouble for calling the principal stupid.



## CHAPTER TWO

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# SELF-ESTEEM

Lauriann happily ran through the school yard, jumped perfectly through the hopscotch game that was drawn out in yellow chalk on the parking lot pavement, stopped briefly at the road to make sure no cars were coming, and rushed home to write her story. Every day when her father got home, she would read her daily story to him. Sometimes it might be a true story, other times it might be made-up story; it didn't matter. The only rule was that it had to contain two new words that she hadn't used before. Today she wrote about her friend Johnny getting in trouble at school.

"...and then Mitch threw the paper airplane that hit Mrs. Churney right in the butt. She was *infuriated*."

Lauriann's father chuckled.

"Johnny looked *dishonoured* as Mrs. Churney sent *him* to the principal's office."

"Wow!" Lauriann's father said. "You're really getting smart using big words like *infuriated* and *dishonoured*. One day, you'll be a world-famous author!"

Lauriann felt good as she humbly said, "It's easy to find new words

on the computer.”

“Tell me more about your camping trip in two weeks,” Lauriann’s father encouraged.

Lauriann pulled out her notes. “We’re going to be in Algonquin Park for three nights. Here’s the list of things Mrs. Churney told us to bring. I have almost everything except a warmer sleeping bag. She said we may even wake up to frost on the ground!”

“Yes, you’ll need a warmer sleeping bag than that old thing you have. After you’ve done your homework, we’ll go out and buy a new one for you.”

“Great! Thank you,” Lauriann said and got started on her homework right away in anticipation of the shopping trip. After a few moments of doing math, she looked at her bookshelf, which was brimming with books, above her desk. As she did so, she wondered what it was going to be like to be a world-famous author.





## CHAPTER THREE

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# HELPLESS

“Then what happened?” Lauriann asked excitedly.

“He just kept telling me what a bad student I was. Then I made my big mistake.”

“What did you do?”

“I called him stupid.” Johnny admitted, lowering his head as he and Lauriann walked through the park to school. He wished he didn’t have to go to school at all.

“Really!” Lauriann exclaimed.

“Yeah, now I have to apologise to him and Mrs. Churney. I may not be able to go on the trip to Algonquin Park.”

Suddenly, Johnny was pushed from behind. Instinctively, his hands flew out in front of his face to protect him as he fell to the ground. Lauriann was so startled by the unexpected attack that she dropped her books.

“Give me your lunch money, loser.”

It was Mitch. The situation was getting more embarrassing by the second. Mitch had taken Johnny’s lunch money before, but never in front of Lauriann.



“Not this time, Mitch!” Johnny tried to get up but Mitch kicked him back to the ground.

“Get out of here, you bully!” yelled Lauriann, taking up in defence of her friend.

Mitch ignored her command and went to kick Johnny again, but Johnny rolled out of the way. Fearfully, he pulled five dollars out of his pocket and gave it to Mitch.

Mitch snapped the bill out of Johnny’s hand and taunted, “See, was that so hard?” He then victoriously turned and walked away.

A sweep of air rushed over Johnny.

Washi stood beside Johnny and screamed, “Next time, try to take money from me!” But Mitch just looked back and laughed. Washi was the new kid in class and hadn’t yet learned who he could and could not mess with.

“Mitch is too big,” Johnny warned his defender.

Washi helped him up off the ground. “Ah, he’s just a bully,” said Washi. “You have to stand up to him.”

Johnny looked at Washi, eying him up and down sceptically. He was even smaller than Johnny. “He’s big though. How do you—?”

Washi’s eyes turned serious, almost scary, and he thrust his hands up toward Johnny’s face. “Back off!” he commanded.

In response to the unexpected action, Johnny felt fear, a deep fear that settled in the pit of his stomach. “Washi...I...why did you—?”

Washi’s body relaxed. “Don’t worry. I’m just showing you what to do.”

Johnny felt better then, knowing Washi wasn’t really serious. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

“Kung fu!”

“Can you teach me how to do that?”

“Sure, if you teach me how to make a paper airplane. The ones you build fly perfectly! My dad’s a pilot—”

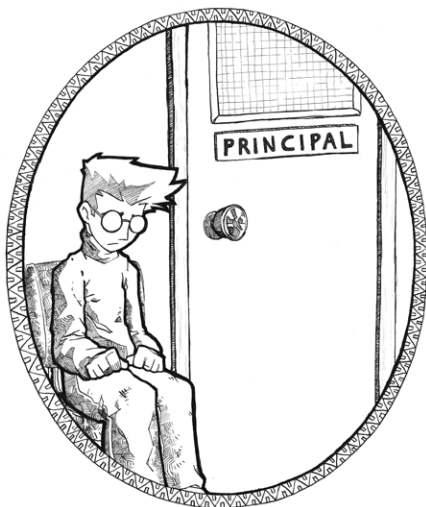
“I want to be an astronaut!” Johnny said excitedly.

“Why don’t you come to my house after school and I can show you

his medals? We build model planes together. They're really cool. He knows a lot about flying and aerodynamics, and he could help you—"

"I can't come over. I'm grounded." Johnny replied disappointedly then thought for a moment. "Besides, I'm just dreaming about being an astronaut. I'm no good in school." As he said this, Johnny thought about what the principal had said about him being a bad student and how bad students didn't get good jobs....

Johnny, Lauriann, and Washi walked toward the school. On the way, Washi taught Johnny how to walk confidently and to stand his ground when bullies like Mitch pushed him around. One thing Washi said really stood out to Johnny, even though he didn't really understand it: "Mitch's body may be bigger than yours, but his spirit is no greater."



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# RESPONSIBILITY

Mr. McIver's face looked grim as he towered over Johnny. His lips were pursed tightly together and his thick eyebrows closed in on each other, making one long bushy black and grey trail across his forehead.

"Yes, sir, I really am sorry for calling you stupid. And even though I didn't throw the airplane, I made it when I should have been doing my school work."

"Who threw the airplane, Johnny?" Mr. McIver asked in a suspicious tone, like he didn't believe Johnny.

"I didn't actually see who threw the plane, sir. But it doesn't matter. If I hadn't made it, nobody could have thrown it. I take full blame."

Johnny felt like he must have said something right because Mr. McIver's face relaxed. A pale fleshy space opened up between his eyebrows and he sat down in his chair.

"Well, Johnny, do you think you should be able to go on the trip to Algonquin Park in two weeks?"

"I really want to go, sir, but I know that I'll be punished..."

"Did your mother punish you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm not allowed to use the computer for video games, or

play road hockey after school, or watch television.”

Mr. McIver nodded his head approvingly. “For how long?”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t really know. Three weeks for sure. That’s when our presentation about Algonquin Park is due. Mom said we’ll talk about it again after I get my mark.”

“Okay, Johnny, I’ll talk to Mrs. Churney about you going on the class trip,” Mr. McIver relented. “The final decision is hers. You may go back to class now.”

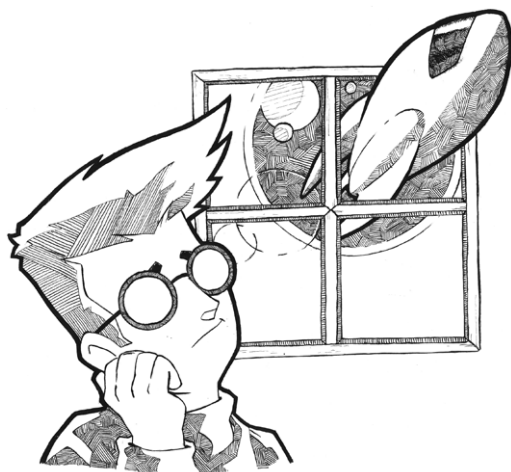
“Thank you, sir,” Johnny replied. He turned back just before he walked out of the office. “Sir?”

“Yes, Johnny.”

“My mom was most upset with me because I called you stupid. She said that name calling is no way to communicate effectively. I just want you to know that it will never happen again.”

“Thank you, Johnny, I accept your apology. Now off you go to class.”

Johnny left the office and obediently returned to class. He felt a lot better than the last time he’d left the principal’s office. Now he just had to wait to see if he could go to Algonquin or not.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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# FOCUS

Johnny had finished his homework by getting right down to business as soon as he arrived home that day. It was the first time ever that he had it completed before dinnertime. After school, he had headed right home, said a quick hello to his friends who were playing road hockey on the street, and went straight up to his room, where he did not even turn on his computer. He didn't want to be tempted to play the games his mother had forbidden. So, he did his homework to keep his mind off his punishment. It was surprising how quickly he'd been able to finish when he didn't take breaks to play games or watch television like he usually did. He focused solely on his homework and it was done in no time. Now, however, there was nothing to do but look at the poster-size photograph that was hanging on the wall over his desk.

It was a digital portrait of earth from outer space called "The Blue Marble." Johnny would stare at that image for hours and imagine that he was actually in outer space. In his visions, he was often blasting through the white, swirling clouds, then the atmosphere, and finally commanding his spaceship out into the galaxy. From that viewpoint, the oceans drew a magnificent blue line along the shores of North and

South America. High mountains and deep valleys, coloured by yellow and green, gave the land texture and made Johnny feel big and powerful to be so high above it all. Whenever he would get into trouble at school, or Mitch had made him feel like a “weakling,” Johnny would look at this poster. He would envision the planet getting smaller and smaller until, reaching deep space, the world became just a fading flicker of light.

Lost in this reverie, Johnny’s bedroom door suddenly flung open and crashed into the doorstopper. Lindbergh bolted into Johnny’s room, with his chewing bone between his teeth, and jumped up on Johnny. Johnny wrestled the bone from the intruder’s mouth, hid it under his arm, and dove onto his bed. Lindberg, a cross between a husky and a golden lab, leaped up beside him and barked. Johnny rolled on his stomach, hiding the bone between his body and the bed while Lindberg walked on Johnny’s back, sticking his nose between Johnny’s armpits and legs and under his ribs in attempt to retrieve his bone. The canine was heavy on Johnny and his nose was strong. Johnny laughed uncontrollably as Lindberg’s snout tickled him all over.

Finally, Johnny rolled over in defeat. Lindberg slobbered his wet tongue all over Johnny’s neck and face. Teasing the dog, Johnny held the bone up over his head. Lindberg jumped for the prize. Just as he was about to grab it, Johnny pulled the bone out of reach and waved it like he was going to throw it. Lindberg flew all the way down to the floor, his tail wagging furiously in anticipation of the throw. Realizing he’d been fooled Lindberg, in one easy spring from his strong legs, was back on the bed yelping for his bone. Keeping up the game, Johnny flung it toward the door. Lindberg flew onto the floor, grabbed the bone, and sprung back onto the bed, waiting for Johnny to wrestle it out of his mouth again.

“What’s going on in here?” Johnny’s mother was standing at the door holding some books.

“We’re just playing,” Johnny said. He grabbed the bone out of Lindberg’s mouth while he wasn’t paying attention.

Johnny’s mother smiled. “Okay, just be careful with Lindberg. His

wound hasn't fully healed yet, although he seems to be feeling better."

Lindberg's tail was wagging, his ears were sticking straight up in perfect triangles, and he was staring intently at the bone in Johnny's hand. He barked again.

Johnny's mother laughed at Lindberg and said, "After you're done playing, I think you better change his dressing again."

"Okay, Mom." Johnny threw the bone on the floor and Lindberg jumped for it. This time, however, the dog didn't bring it back. Rather, he protected it under his paw and licked it. As he did so, his eyes kept shifting up to Johnny as if taunting him to come and get it.

Lindberg had recently had an operation to remove a growth from his stomach and the veterinarian had showed Johnny how to keep it clean.

"I thought you might like to look at these," Johnny's mother said as she handed him three books on Algonquin Park.

Johnny hesitated as he took them and said, "Oh...thanks..."

"That's it, thanks in that tone?" Johnny's mother asked.

"I'm not even sure I'm allowed to go..." Johnny's shoulders curled in and his chin dropped toward his chest in disappointment.

"I just spoke to Mr. McIver and he said you did a very good job apologizing. And Mrs. Churney was also very pleased with you. Therefore—"

Johnny flicked his head up. "I can go?"

"You can go!" she replied excitedly.

Johnny jumped from the bed and hugged his mother. "Thanks!" Seeing his playmate in motion, Lindberg grabbed his bone between his teeth then ran over and nudged Johnny's leg, wanting to join in on the excitement. Obliging his pet, Johnny grabbed the bone and dove onto the bed. Lindberg followed in hot pursuit.

"Dinner is in thirty minutes," his mother informed as she left the room.

Johnny and Lindberg wrestled for a little while longer.

"Okay, boy, it's time to change your dressing." Johnny took Lindberg

to the bathroom to disinfect the wound and apply a new bandage. At first, Lindberg had tenderly nipped at Johnny while he redressed the wound. This had been the canine's way of telling Johnny that it hurt. But now, Lindberg was used to it and just licked the back of Johnny's hands while he worked. When finished, Johnny went back to his room to read the books his mother had given him.

He was fully engaged in learning about this wild sanctuary that contained so many species of animals, trees, insects, fish, and plants yet was so close in proximity to the city of Toronto. Lindberg lay down beside Johnny on the bed and chewed on his bone.





## CHAPTER SIX

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# ENTHUSIASM

Johnny was so excited that he was going to be able to go on the trip after all that he could barely sleep! Filling up his time with homework and research on the trip, the two weeks of being grounded passed by quickly. Johnny was getting better marks in class because his homework was always done on time and correctly. And now, because of the books his mother had given him, he knew so much more about Algonquin Park than he had before. The story of how Algonquin had become a Provincial Park was amazing!

The day of departure finally arrived and Johnny could see the yellow school bus waiting outside. The class had been divided into three groups. Each group had seven students. Two parents had come to help Mrs. Churney organize the trip and each adult was responsible for one group. Johnny was happy that Lauriann and Washi were in his group.

“When we get on the bus, I want everybody to sit close to their group and make a plan on what each person is responsible for. We want to find as many of the plants, trees, insects, and animals in the workbooks as we can,” Mrs. Churney instructed. “And remember, each of you has to do a presentation on Algonquin Park in front of the class

when we get back. Now single-file out to the bus.”

Johnny sat down beside Lauriann when he got on the bus.

“I’m happy you could come, Johnny,” Lauriann said.

“Yeah, me too! This is going to be great! I bet our group finds the most specimens in our books. I know exactly what to look for! I’ve been studying.” Johnny kept the attention of his whole group with stories of Algonquin Park.

After a little while of excited chatter, everybody grew quiet. Some kids were looking in their books; others were looking out the window. Daphne, another student in Johnny’s group, was humming a song. Then she started to sing:

*The other day,*

Daphne stopped and looked around, gauging her audience. She said, “Everybody has to sing after every line I sing.” So, granting her request, after every line Daphne sang, the whole class, the parents, Mrs. Churney, and even the school bus driver followed.

*The other day,  
I met a bear,  
Out in the woods,  
A way out there.*

*The other day I met a bear,  
Out in the woods a way out there.*

*He looked at me,  
I looked at him,  
He sized up me,  
I sized up him.*

*He looked at me, I looked him,*

*He sized up me, I sized up him...*

And they merrily sang and sang and sang....



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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# NATURE'S BEAUTY

It was a four-hour bus ride but it didn't seem long. Everybody sang and told stories, and to even the weight, each group divided up their food into different knapsacks. The bus turned down a rough and bumpy dirt road that was narrowly flanked by dense evergreen, spruce, and pine trees. They were almost there!

Mrs. Churney stood at the front of the bus and said, "Okay, everybody, over the course of three days, we will be hiking thirty-two kilometres. We only have two hours until lunch so we'll have to make the most of our progress this afternoon." Churning with excitement, the bus party exited the vehicle then Mrs. Churney and the other group leaders organized the students outside the bus.

After loading up their packs, the three groups started off on their journey. Rain Lake would be their first campground destination. Johnny, Lauriann, and Washi stayed close together as they walked along a narrow path that was enclosed on either side by spruce and cedar trees. The camping party stopped for lunch when they arrived at the west side of Rain Lake.

As the others scrambled to find some flat and comfortable place to

sit and eat, a faded red and yellow leaf floated to the ground in front of Johnny. He picked it up and studied it. This leaf had budded green and full of life in the spring. It had then captured the loving energy of the summer sun and, carrying out its final duty, had released its remaining nutrients back to the tree so that it might survive the winter.

Johnny closed his eyes and took a deep breath in. The fresh pine-scented breeze blowing in from the lake cooled over his face. He exhaled and opened his eyes; the trees across the lake blazed into his vision with vivid hues of fiery red, deep orange, and brilliant yellow. Nature's colourful gift awakened his imagination and touched his spirit.

"Wow, it's beautiful!" Lauriann said as she came up behind Johnny.

Johnny opened his notebook and placed the leaf between the pages to protect it. Somehow there was an important lesson to be learned in that leaf. The two friends sat quietly, looking at the scenery and eating their sandwiches.

"Okay, everybody, get your gear back on and let's keep moving," Mrs. Churney pep-talked the group after everybody had finished their lunch.

As part of the team effort, everyone was to help each other put on their knapsacks. Already standing side by side, Johnny and Lauriann helped each other. When his bag was firmly on his back, Johnny snapped its front buckle closed and started to walk. Then, as if a hundred pounds of led had been dropped on his knapsack, he was thrown off balance and fell backwards. Looking up from the ground he saw Mitch standing over him, laughing.

"What's the matter, weakling? Is the pack too heavy for you?" Mitch jested as he kicked loose pine needles in Johnny's face.

Johnny couldn't stand up. He kicked out his legs and thrashed his arms around in an effort to find something solid to grab onto. Nothing—the backpack anchored him to the ground. In his helpless position, he felt like a turtle that was stranded upside-down on its shell. Finding enjoyment in his predicament, all the kids laughed at Johnny. Finally, Malik and Washi pulled Johnny to his feet. Johnny's face was hot and

flush with embarrassment as he positioned himself upright. He couldn't even look at Lauriann.

As the group collected itself and proceeded forward, Johnny stayed between Washi and Malik so Mitch couldn't play any more games. Why had Mitch only picked on him? He had tried what Washi had taught him to keep Mitch away but it obviously wasn't working. Whenever he gave it a whirl, Mitch would just laugh and push him around some more.

The three groups walked down into the valley and through a winding trail that opened up to three campsites on the shore of Rain Lake. Johnny could feel strained muscles in his body, from his toes to his head—muscles that until today he hadn't even known he had.

Other than being pulled down from behind by Mitch, the day had been a great success. Over the course of their hike, they had seen many different types of birds, squirrels, and trees, including sugar-maples, birches, and pines. They had even passed a beaver dam, although the beaver was nowhere to be seen.

All three groups, with instruction from their leaders, went about setting up camp. After eating noodles cooked in a pot over a fire, Johnny's group gathered on the rocky shore at the edge of the lake. The steaming hot chocolate they all sipped was a great reward for a hard day's work. The sun hovered momentarily over the tips of the pine trees on the west end of the lake. It cast a warm shimmering glow on the water, which reflected a golden line directly to where Johnny was sitting, as though it were meant only for him. The gentle sound of waves lapping against the jagged shore was the only sound as they all gazed in awe at the natural beauty that surrounded them. It was so peaceful there. The sun crawled behind the tree line, taking its warmth from the air and its glow from the water. All of a sudden, it was cold!

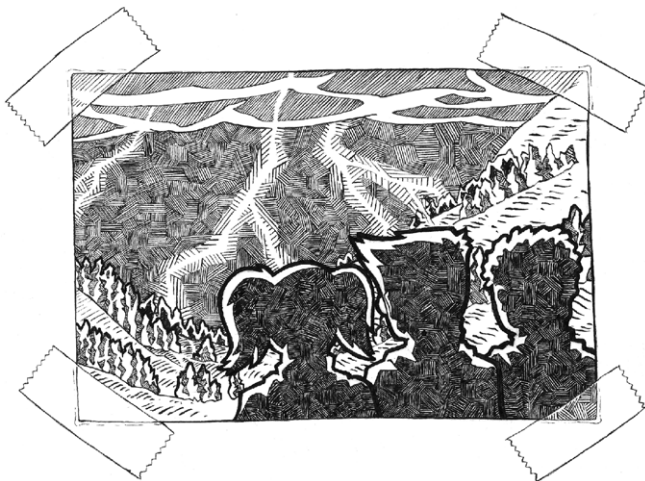
"Time to get some rest!" Mr. Richardson said.

The campers obediently went to their respective tents, girls with girls and boys with boys, and crawled into their sleeping bags. Just as he closed his exhausted eyes, Johnny was startled as a mournful wail that

cried out into the night.

“Goodnight, Mr. Loon,” Mr. Richardson said.

Johnny felt happy and relieved. He had just heard a loon for the first time! He could feel a big smile expand across his face as he drifted off to sleep.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

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# NATURE'S POWER

The morning proved dark and dreary. Johnny did not feel like crawling out of his warm sleeping bag, but Mr. Richardson was shaking them all to get up. "A new day has arrived!" he enthused.

Sleepily, everybody packed up the campsite, picking up their garbage and leaving it cleaner than it had been before they arrived. They were taking part in "No Trace" camping. That meant, as part of their environmental responsibility while on this trip, they were to pick up any and all garbage along the way. Whoever picked up the most trash won a prize and got her or his name in the local newspaper as additional reward. Fuelling up for the day ahead, they had some hot oatmeal, cooked over a propane stove, for breakfast and went on their way. Johnny vowed to keep Mitch in his sights the entire day.

The three groups walked around the end of Rain Lake and made their way east into the forest. They meandered up and down hills, around winding paths, and through slender trails lined by pine trees. The day was grey, cool, and windy. They were halfway up one hill when Johnny was stuck by a strange feeling.

He paused and noticed that the leaves on the trees were completely



still. The biting wind that had been pushing its cold hand across Johnny's face all day was gone. The distant grumble of thunder could be heard. The whole park seemed to stand completely still, as if in fearful anticipation. A flash of lightning caught Johnny's eye. Dark, thick clouds lower than the grey ones that had dimmed the sky all morning, moved in slowly from the North. Once reaching the top of the hill, everybody put on their rain suits in expectation of the drenching that was sure to beat down on them.

"Move it, move it, move it!" Mrs. Churney ordered. "We have to get away from the edge of the hill."

The sky grew darker and the thunder boomed louder, closer. When Johnny turned to see if Lauriann was okay, he noticed something amazing in the valley.

Before Johnny's eyes, the ground below swirled up toward the clouds. A giant twisting funnel rose as if powered by some invisible force. It appeared to sit in one place, spinning like a top; then it disappeared. Some trees in the valley were now bending to their limit from the force of the gale; others remained untouched.

The storm barrier was a clear line that moved slowly across the valley toward the hill Johnny stood on. A bolt of lightning leapt up from the ground into the dark cloud above. The brilliant flash was immediately followed by a loud crack of thunder, the force of which rumbled through Johnny's body. The storm's energy crushed everything in its wake. Trees were no match for the bright branches of electricity that struck them down from the top, nor did they prove any competition for the snarling north wind that pulled them out by the root. Sporadic flashes of lightning danced through the space under the black, low-lying clouds. Johnny could hear the teacher and parents screaming for the kids to move into the forest away from the trail, but he stood motionless, mesmerized by the sight before him.

Rain swept across the valley like a curtain, a wall of water rushing down in its relentless attempt to wash the forest clean. Nature's beauty had turned to nature's fury.

A few drops of rain smacked Johnny in the face and startled him back to the seriousness of the situation. He turned to move in from the ridge's edge, but it was too late. The ledge was pulled out from beneath his feet.

Out of pure reaction, he tucked his chin into his chest. As he did so, the earth met his body with a crashing blow, but Johnny did not stop. He kept tumbling forward. Whenever he or his backpack met the ground, it would send him airborne again, pushing him faster toward the deep, dark forest. The whole world was spinning around and around as he bowled down the steep embankment. Terror and panic over the unknown tightly gripped his mind and body.



## CHAPTER NINE

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# RESOURCEFULNESS

Johnny finally plunged into a wet mud pit, his backpack still firmly attached to his shoulders. A broken, jagged tree, cut off by the wind, stuck out of the ground just beside him. Grabbing where the trunk had split open, Johnny struggled to pull himself up. His whole body felt like one big bruise.

“Help!” somebody screamed from close by. It sounded like Lauriann.

“Lauriann!” Johnny yelled.

“I’m over here.”

Johnny, in defiance of his pain, moved through the heavy rain toward the voice. He found Lauriann, who was propped up on her elbows beside a fallen tree without her backpack.

“My foot is trapped under this tree. I can’t get out,” Lauriann exclaimed, stricken by fear.

Johnny heaved and heaved on the tree in an effort to free her but it wouldn’t move. “Help!” he screamed into the forest, desperate for assistance.

“Where are you?” another voice bellowed.

"Over here, we're over here!" Johnny was relieved to see Malik appear from behind the dark curtain of rain.

"Malik, help me get this tree off Lauriann."

They both heaved but the tree wouldn't budge.

"Are you hurt, Lauriann?" Johnny concernedly kneeled down and held her hand.

"My ankle hurts," she replied.

Heavy rain cascaded across Lauriann's face. Since he couldn't extract her, he decided to make himself useful another way. Johnny grabbed his knapsack and took out a tarp and some rope. He tied the tarp to three trees to direct the rain away from her.

Malik looked around. "I have an idea," he said as he grabbed a handsaw that was strapped to the side of his knapsack. He went to a tree that had been blown down by the wind and began to saw off a large branch. Johnny stayed close to Lauriann while Malik worked on the tree.

After a few minutes, Malik came back with a ten foot branch. It was solid and straight and measured about six inches in diameter. He plunged the end of the shaft into the mud about a foot away from where Lauriann was lying. He then ran back with his saw to cut another branch. When Malik returned again, he slid the second sawed-off branch in a parallel direction to the tree that had trapped Lauriann. Now he had a sturdy surface on which to wedge the tree free.

"Johnny, help me," Malik said as he started to pull down on the lever he had created.

Johnny jumped up and they both pulled down. Their faces grimaced with the effort. "Come on, come on!" Johnny encouraged as he used all his strength. The branch they were using as leverage was bending, almost to the breaking point. "On the count of three, give it one quick yank, Malik," Johnny instructed. "One, two, three!"

Malik and Johnny both gave a quick firm jerk on the branch, straining it even more. It was now a fight between the branch they were using, the tree stuck in the mud, and the will of Johnny and Malik to

see which would give out first.

Johnny was afraid that he couldn't hold it much longer. His body was trembling when the branch he and Malik were using snapped. The two boys were thrown three feet back into thick mud. Just before it broke, the tree trapping Lauriann made a grotesque sucking sound and momentarily freed itself from the mud. Lauriann quickly pulled her foot out and the tree plunged down hard, deeper and more entrenched in the soft ground.

Johnny struggled to get up and hurried to Lauriann. "Are you okay?"

Lauriann stood but pain, like a bolt of lightning, shot through her leg. She fell back down to the ground, reeling in anguish. She did not want to cry. She wanted to be strong, but the pain was unbearable. "I...I..." She could not form words as tears rushed down her face.

Johnny kneeled down beside her and held her hand. A frightening emotion, deeper and more pronounced than anything he had ever experienced before, rose within him: helplessness. He couldn't stand to see Lauriann in pain.

After a few moments, Lauriann stopped crying. Taking advantage of her state of calmness, Johnny gently removed her boot and looked at her foot. Her ankle was swelling up. Johnny immediately pulled a tensor bandage from the first-aid kit and began to wrap her ankle. "We have to keep the swelling down," he explained as he worked. He remembered a time when he'd been playing street hockey and he'd fallen over on his ankle. The doctor had wrapped it and he had walked on crutches for over a month. It was difficult to get Lauriann's boot back on, but doing so was important to help keep the swelling down and her foot warm.

Lauriann's face winced with pain as Johnny tied up her lace. Malik was holding her hand in reassurance. Johnny and Malik helped her stand, but she could not put any pressure at all on that foot.

"Now what?" Malik asked

They didn't know what else to do. The hill they had fallen down was too steep and slippery to go back up, especially with Lauriann able

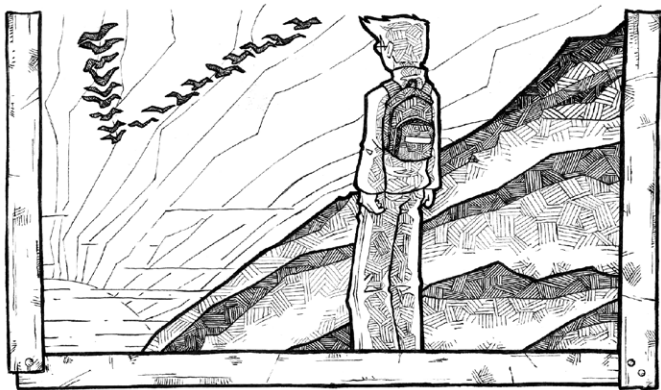
to use only one leg.

“Let’s walk this way to see if we can find anybody,” Johnny said.

They all started moving forward, Lauriann hopping while holding Johnny’s shoulder for balance.

“I’m scared,” Lauriann admitted.

Johnny felt scared too, but even stronger was the feeling to protect Lauriann. “We’ll be okay,” Johnny said confidently as they slowly made their way over fallen trees and thick mud.



## CHAPTER TEN

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# LEADERSHIP

Calling out for help, Johnny, Lauriann, and Malik continued through the pouring rain, trekking their way over broken trees and pools of mud. As they inched forward, they stayed close to the foot of the hill. The storm had torn trees from the ground and had littered them all over, making it difficult to stay in a straight line. Fortunately, the wind, lightning and thunder had passed. After about thirty minutes, the threesome found Daphne, who was also calling for help. Her face, pale with fear, relaxed at the sight of Johnny, Lauriann, and Malik.

“I think I heard something over there,” Daphne said as she pointed nervously to her left.

“Let’s walk that way then,” Johnny said.

“Maybe we should wait for somebody here,” Daphne suggested.

Johnny looked up. “I don’t think anybody can make it down or up that hill. It’s totally washed away. Besides, I think it may be dangerous to stay here.” Johnny looked up and could see trees, half out of the ground, that were clinging insecurely to the side of the hill.

“We’ll follow you, Johnny,” Malik said, handing the leadership role over to Johnny.

Johnny was normally timid and, in another situation, might have shied away from the leadership position. But Lauriann's hold on his shoulder was tight, a constant reminder that his insecurities would not get them to safety. "We have to move from here," Johnny said with authority. He had always imagined commanding a spaceship through the galaxy but he had never thought he would be navigating through the forest. "Here, Malik, help Lauriann while I walk ahead."

As they forged their way into the deep brush, they heard someone yell from behind, "Hey, wait for me!"

"Washi!" Johnny said excitedly as he turned back. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay; I'm just a little beat up from the fall down the hill."

"Join the club," Johnny replied. "Follow us." Malik and Lauriann slowly made their way toward Johnny.

Washi looked toward the direction Johnny wanted to go. It was dark and eerie. "That way?" he asked sceptically.

Matter-of-factly, Johnny responded, "It's our only hope, the hill—"

"Look out!" Lauriann screamed.

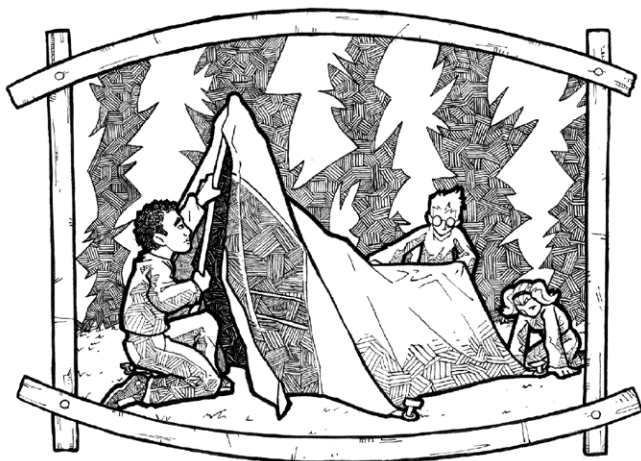
Johnny turned and saw that the ledge, thirty feet above Washi, was breaking away. A pine tree was coming straight down, like a spear, hurtling directly at Washi.

Without hesitation, or fear for his life, Johnny lunged and pushed Washi out of the way. The two boys fell over and landed in a tangle to the side. The tree stabbed into the ground just inches away from Johnny's feet. Mud and water splattered all over the two boys as the tree drove itself deep into the mushy ground.

Washi looked at Johnny and said, "Let's get out of here!"

Johnny led the group into the dark, thick brush, unsure of what to expect. It seemed dangerous, but what else could they do? He had to be strong and brave. The group was counting on him.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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# PERSEVERANCE

In advance of the group, Johnny walked through the thick brush, his feet heavy from the cakes of mud that had collected on the soles of his boots and his body soaked from rain. The group's pace was slow. Rain absorbed into the fabric of their knapsacks, making the gear heavy. Night was quickly descending on the forest. An unpleasant coolness worked its way through Johnny's wet clothes and clung unwelcomingly to his damp skin. His body rebelled with a violent shiver, but the cold did not go away.

"We have to set up camp for the night and start again in the morning," Johnny said. He looked at the group. Their bodies, shaking from the cold, were crushing down under the weight of their knapsacks. Lauriann was standing on one leg and looked ready to fall over. To lessen the burden, she had made crutches out of branches and walked on her own in areas where she was able.

The quintet searched for a clearing large enough to pitch a tent. "We'll stop here," Johnny decided. The ground was not flat and roots popped up like veins through the pine-needle floor of the forest. But that was the best they could find.

Johnny and Washi put up the tent while Lauriann, Melik, and Daphne emptied the contents of their knapsacks to get out the sleeping bags. The last remnants of light were quickly being extinguished from the forest as the cold blackness of night forced its way in.

Fortunately, Mrs. Churney had told them all to wrap their sleeping bags in thick plastic bags with two pairs of socks, pants, and shirts before packing them in their knapsacks. Lauriann was the only one who had lost her pack, so Johnny gave her dry clothes from his pack to wear. She and Daphne would sleep in the same sleeping bag.

Daphne pulled out a flashlight. It was smashed beyond repair from the fall down the hill. In fact, everybody's flashlight was broken, thereby eliminating the possibility of light.

The bags of nuts and dried fruit they had each brought along had exploded in their bags, leaving the contents soggy. At least they had something to eat, although it wasn't very tasty by that point. Famished and exhausted from the effort of the day, they ate a little then crawled into the tent, cold, tired, and scared.

A faint distant cry echoed through the night then slowly died. Daphne screamed fearfully, "What was that?"

A second cry pierced the night with a high-pitched shrillness that sent shivers up their spines.

"Wolves, I think," Johnny replied. He was scared too but he tried not to show it.

"Wolves!" Lauriann exclaimed.

"Relax, Lauriann, wolves don't attack people," Johnny reassured. *At least not very often*, he thought, remembering what he had read about wolves.

Another wolf cried out, and before the sound had dissipated, another louder howl sounded. Cry after cry was emitted, the answering cries turning the night into an orchestra of fear for Johnny and his friends. The wails of the wild made the group mindful of the dangerous situation they were in.

"Johnny, I'm scared," Daphne admitted.

“Me, too,” Lauriann echoed.

The guys said nothing but Johnny knew they were scared too. The thin nylon of the tent was the only barrier between them and the untamed world of Algonquin Park. Nobody could save them now—not their parents, not their teachers, nobody. They were on their own in the dead, dark wilderness. They were at the mercy of the living things that come out at night.

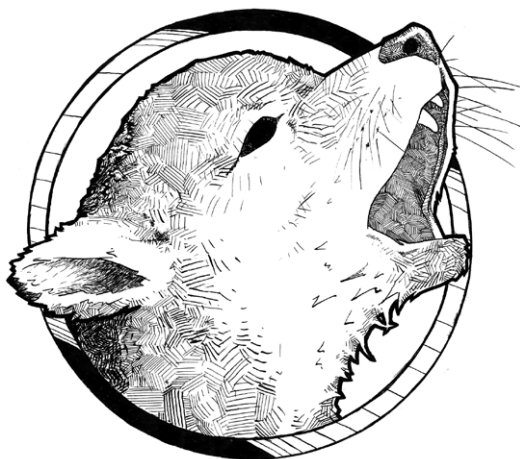
The wolves stopped howling and it became eerily silent, which proved even creepier to the already on-edge quintet. A branch snapped outside.

Footsteps moved around the tent as if some creature were looking for a way inside. More branches snapped around the tent. It wasn’t just one animal; there were at least two, maybe more.

“Shhh, be quiet and still,” Johnny whispered.

It seemed like there were dozens of animals outside. Johnny could hear sniffing around the tent. Nobody made a sound. Then a commotion out in front of the tent, where the wet knapsacks lay, erupted. Night creatures were clawing at the gear in search of food. Johnny and his friends had forgotten one important thing from the night before: Tie the food to a branch of a tree, away from the reach of animals.

Before long, the night turned ominously silent. Johnny’s heart pounded. It felt as if there were a wild horse inside his chest kicking to get out.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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# COMPASSION

There was nothing lively about the morning. Daybreak weakly pushed its way through the leafless branches, throwing patches of faded light on the tent. Exhaustion and fatigue from the previous day's toil somehow overpowered fear and the group had all finally fallen asleep.

Slowly and with painstaking stiffness, Johnny forced his body to get up and out of his warm sleeping bag. Outside the tent, he noticed plastic bags and gear from the knapsacks strewn all over the ground. The bandits of the night had ripped through their packs and thieved all the food they had. *Great*, he thought, *now we have no food*.

Silently, the quintet packed up their gear. They were hungry and disheartened but at least they were dry. Johnny thought about the early pioneers who had to clear trails, build camps, and hunt for food through this new untamed land and newfound determination surged through him.

Ahead of Johnny lay an open field of broken trees that had been created by the storm. He heard the cry of an animal. It sounded a little bit like his dog Lindbergh when he'd had the operation. Johnny drew closer to the sound, caution guiding every movement, until he saw the

grey and black fur of an animal lying on its side. As Johnny continued onward, he could see the rust-coloured snout and ears of the whining creature. It was an Algonquin wolf, an animal he had read about. Its chest heaved up and down quickly, panic-stricken at the sight of Johnny. Unafraid, Johnny dropped his pack and slowly made his way to the wolf's side. "It's okay, boy, just relax." Its paw was trapped under a pine tree that had been felled by the storm. Blood trickled across the animal's leg. It looked as if the wolf had tried to gnaw off its own paw in an attempt to get out from under the tree. Johnny's heart sank with sadness.

"Johnny, what are you doing?" Daphne asked as she stopped by his knapsack.

"There's a wounded wolf here. I want to help him."

"What? A wolf! There in front of you!" Daphne yelled.

"Yeah, he's really hurt. Daphne, grab the first-aid kit out of my pack and bring it here."

"There, where the wolf is?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Daphne, he's trapped under a tree. He can't hurt us," Johnny assured her. "And bring one of my shirts and the rope."

By the time Daphne grabbed the supplies from Johnny's pack, the whole group had converged around the trapped wolf. Lauriann was supporting herself on a branch. Johnny remembered Lindberg's operation and how, when he was having his stitches removed, he had snapped at the vet. This gave Johnny an idea. He tied a slipknot into the rope and went around the back of the wolf. The wolf snarled angrily at Johnny, clipping its sharp teeth in continuous rapid successions in an attempt to keep him away. Johnny carefully approached the wolf. As the wolf flicked its head up to snap at Johnny, he attempted to pull the rope over its snout. The wolf flung it off and seemed to get angrier. In response, the injured animal moved its head around in vicious, spastic motions. Johnny tried again and again to no avail.

Daphne came closer to the wolf, just out of distance of his fangs, and started to sing softly, "*Don't you worry, little wolfie. We won't hurt*

*you...*" She continued singing words of encouragement. Miraculously, the wolf stopped thrashing about and looked quizzically at Daphne, its ears standing straight up at the sound of her voice. He cocked his head sideways and let out a little whimper.

Seizing the opportunity, Johnny swung the slipknot over the creature's muzzle and pulled tightly. The wolf whined and shook its head violently in an attempt to escape but its mouth was seized shut.

"Here, Washi, hold this," Johnny instructed.

Washi rushed to Johnny's side and grabbed the rope. Now the wolf could not bite Johnny as he tended to its wound. Daphne continued to sing while the wolf just whined; its eyes were sad, vulnerable.

"It's okay, boy, it's okay," Johnny soothed as he attended to the wolf's wound. "It's not so bad, boy. Just take it easy and I'll fix you up."

Johnny took medicated cleaning swabs out of the first-aid kit and cleaned off the wound just like he had with Lindberg. He talked all the while in reassurance. "That's it, boy, just stay calm. You're doing great."

The wolf whined and laid its head back on the ground. Daphne continued to sing. The wolf's chest was rising and falling less quickly, as if it were conceding defeat. "Good, that's it; we're almost done," Johnny said.

"Is he going to be all right?" Lauriann asked caringly.

"I think so. It doesn't look like it's broken. If he hadn't tried to gnaw his own foot off, he'd be fine." Johnny finished cleaning the wound. "Okay, now we're ready to free him."

Washi was still holding the rope tightly, keeping the wolf's mouth shut.

"Malik, Lauriann, and Daphne, take our packs and gear over there behind those fallen trees." Johnny pointed to an area in the distance where trees were uprooted and would form some protection.

As they did what he told them, Johnny went to Washi's side. "Okay, let the rope slip through your hands enough to give us some distance from its mouth." Johnny and Washi backed away but still held control

of the rope. When they were just out of distance, Johnny barked, "Okay, let the rope go." As Washi released it, the wolf growled and thrashed its head about to shake the constraint off.

Johnny and Washi ran around to the end of the tree, which was about seven meters away from the wolf. They both grabbed long branches and set them by their feet. They then lifted and pushed the tree up enough for the wolf to pull its foot out. Johnny held the tree up while Washi grabbed the thick branches for protection in case the wolf tried to attack them. The wolf staggered to its feet, looked right at Johnny and Washi, and then turned to Daphne, Malik, and Lauriann. It pointed its snout toward the sky and let out a long, shrieking howl. Its battle cry emitted, it then slowly limped off into the bush, away from its rescuers.

Johnny and Washi cheered, "We saved him!" Lauriann, Daphne, and Malik cheered too.

Once back together, they had to make a plan of action. Johnny looked around but felt lost. Every direction looked the same: trees either jutting up toward the sky or lying horizontal with their intertwining roots sticking up out of the ground. He pulled out his compass, but like just about everything else in his bag, it was broken beyond repair from the fall down the hill.

Washi looked around the group and then at the gear. "We can't keep carrying everything. We have to dump some supplies to make our loads lighter."

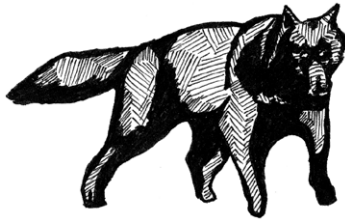
Malik agreed. "Yes, Washi's right. We have no food and we don't know where we are. I say we just keep the essentials and leave everything else here."

"Yeah, I guess we have to..." Johnny acknowledged. "How are we going to find our way out of this place?" He looked in every direction and could not decide on which way to go. What kind of leader was he?

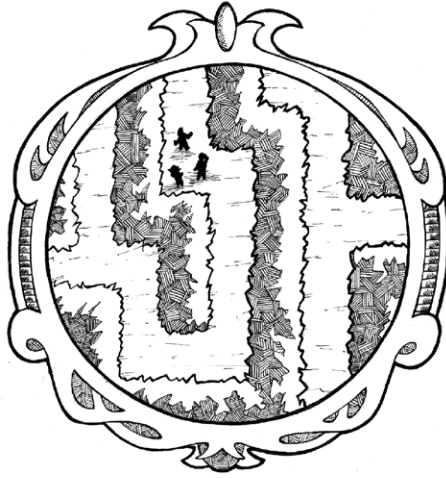
"Don't worry, Johnny," Lauriann said. "We'll find a way. Look what we just did; we saved a wolf! We can do anything!"

"Yeah, I guess so," Johnny cautiously agreed, still not feeling very confident.

Johnny started walking. He wasn't sure where but he was the leader and they were counting on him.







## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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# DISAPPOINTMENT

As they walked through the pine, spruce, and fir trees the lost classmates shouted for help. They walked, and they walked, and they walked, with no response to their distress signals. Their steps became more laboured as they progressed, their bodies growing weaker by the minute. The sky was a gloomy grey. There was no telling where the sun was, nor was there any way to discern between east and west, north and south. It seemed like they had walked for hours.

“I’m hungry,” Malik said.

“I’m tired; I can’t walk anymore,” Daphne complained.

The foursome was looking at Johnny for guidance. “Well, I’m tired and hungry too, but what do you want me to do about it?” Johnny snapped.

Washi said nothing but it was obvious that he was agitated.

“Let’s just sit down and have a break, everybody. We have to keep trying and not get angry with each other,” Lauriann reasoned.

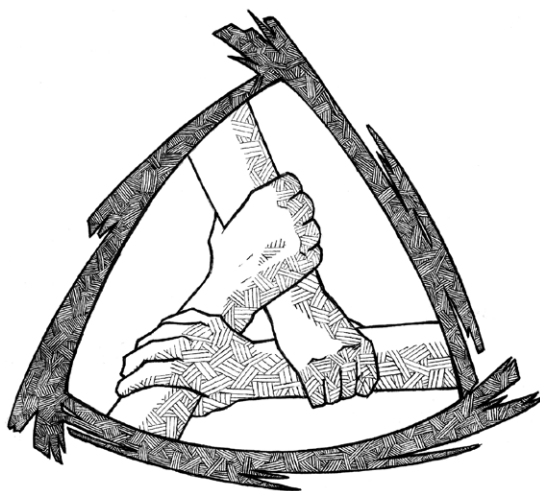
“She’s right,” Washi said. “We need to stick together.” Washi looked around. “Everything looks the same. Isn’t anybody looking for us? We’ve been shouting and screaming for hours.”

Johnny's voice was sore from screaming and he was upset that thus far the forest had only returned empty echoes of their own voices. "There looks to be a bit of an opening just ahead. Let's stop there for a break. Surely we must be getting close to something," Johnny said, taking the leadership role once again.

The quintet walked ahead into the clearing as Johnny suggested. As they approached, they were stunned by the sight that befell them. After walking for hours, their bodies sore and tired, their energy all but depleted, they stood, mouths agape, in front of the very same gear they had discarded earlier to make their loads lighter.

Washi sighed and looked toward the ground, Lauriann shook her head, Daphne started to cry, Malik angrily kicked a fallen tree, and a single solitary tear fell from Johnny's left eye. Their bodies slouched toward the ground in defeat. After several gruelling hours, they were right back where they had started. Their enthusiasm over saving the wolf had run dry. The fuel of hope had left their spirits.

Not one person in the whole group had the energy or enthusiasm to continue on.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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# TEAMWORK

The five lost friends sat there in the clearing for a long time, saying nothing and feeling beat. Suddenly struck by a thought, Washi jumped up. “Do something!” he shouted.

“What?” Johnny asked.

“I just thought of when I did my self-defence test in kung fu. I was really tired because students, and some instructors, were attacking me, one after the other. Every time I saved myself, somebody else would attack me over and over again until I was too tired to even move. I wanted to just give up but my teacher yelled at me, “Do something! Do Something! Never say die!”

“Then what happened?” Daphne asked.

“I found strength inside that I didn’t know I had. I kept fighting and somehow I found a way. My teacher said it’s wrong to give up. We have to keep going and find a way. We all have power inside us that we don’t even know about.”

“We do?” Malik asked.

“Yes, but the only way to find it is to believe in ourselves, to keep going and ne—”

“Never say die!” Malik stood and threw his fist in the air.

“Never say die!” the rest of the group screamed in unison just after Malik finished his war cry.

New energy suffused the group.

“Okay, let’s keep going,” Washi said. “We’ll pick a different way this time and we’ll be sure to find a trail or some people.”

Johnny looked toward the ground. “Sorry for leading us back here,” he said.

“Don’t worry, Johnny,” Lauriann said. “Like Washi says, we have to believe in ourselves and keep going, no matter what. We believe in you as our leader.”

Everybody agreed.

“But I haven’t been doing a very good job at it,” Johnny said with his head still bowed.

Daphne looked in the direction they went the first time, the one that led them back to where they now stood. “Well, at least we’ve discovered one way *not* to go!” she said, smiling.

Johnny laughed at the different way Daphne looked at things. “Thanks, Daphne, I feel better now.”

“You’re a great leader, Johnny. You helped free a wolf and you saved Washi from being hit by a tree. You also helped save me,” Lauriann said.

“Yeah, but Malik came up with the idea to save you, and you shouted that the tree was falling or I wouldn’t have been able to push Washi out of the way....”

As he humbly brushed aside the compliment, Johnny was struck by a realization of what true leadership was. It was not being better or more knowledgeable than everybody else. No! Great leadership was guiding each person to utilize her or his natural talents to further the goals of the group. Daphne had soothed the wolf with her voice, helping them to save it; Malik’s ingenuity had saved Lauriann; Washi was good at inspiring the group.... He looked at Lauriann and was sure that she was the answer now. “Lauriann, if you were writing this story, what would

the characters do next?"

Lauriann looked at Johnny and said nothing for a moment. She then gazed up toward the sky. "That's a good question, Johnny." Lauriann thought about the heroes in her stories and what they might do given the same circumstances. Her heroes always won out over difficulty and danger. "Well, they would look for clues as to where to go. We started this trip walking east toward Rain Lake, so we should walk west to get back. With the sky being so grey, we can't use the sun as our guide." She looked up and thought for a moment. "Where do the heaviest winds normally come from?" She then shifted her gaze around the group, seeking a reply.

"Northwest!" Daphne said excitedly.

"Yeah, northwest," Johnny said, "but there is no wind now."

"Yes, but look at the tips of the trees that are still standing. Look how many of the tallest ones have been shaped by the wind," Lauriann said as though she were a living character in a book. "They seem to be pointing in the same direction. If they were pushed by the northwest winds, I would say they are pointing southeast. It's not a guarantee but it's a start."

The whole group gazed at the tips of the trees, except Lauriann, who was now looking toward the base. "Look here," she said like a detective searching for clues. "Moss is growing on one side. Where does moss usually grow?"

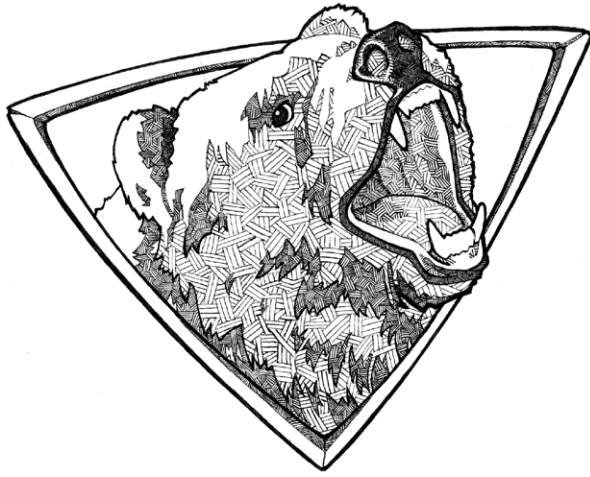
Johnny said, "I read that it grows best in a dark cool environment which is normally on the northeast side! And looking up at the way the tips of the tallest trees are pointing..."

"West would be this way." Lauriann pointed to her right.

They were all excited and inspired by their newfound knowledge. From somewhere deep inside, they all found the energy Washi had been talking about. Johnny learned something important about leadership that day and about never saying die. As they began to make their way forward again, Lauriann suggested that they leave markers on the path they had taken so that they would know if they were covering the same

ground again. The markers would also serve as a clue for people looking for them.

Daphne sang, Lauriann searched for more clues, Malik helped Johnny forge through the thick brush, and Washi scribed large arrows in the ground in the direction they were walking. Moving through the forest with newfound energy, the quintet was now confident that they were going to be saved.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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# FEAR

Johnny and Lauriann saw them first, wrestling, each vying for control. It was an amazing sight. The rest of the group approached and were astonished by the same images. There, right in front of their eyes, two small bear cubs were playing a rousing game of King of the Mountain.

“They’re so cute!” whispered Lauriann, not wanting her voice to disturb their antics.

The group stood in awe. Oblivious to Johnny and his friends who were watching, one of the cubs swatted the other one, knocking him to the ground. The downed cub got up and jumped right on his brother. They rolled around in a playful struggle to see which one could get on top, biting, licking, and swatting each other in the process. Each of them was no bigger than a medium-sized dog. Johnny and his friends stood motionless in the middle of the forest, mesmerized by untamed animals in their natural environment. Having fun!

The hair on the back of Johnny’s neck tingled, signalling danger, and a cold shiver suddenly ran up his spine. Slowly, he turned. As he did so, he could feel the blood drain from his face. A primal fear gripped him so tightly that his muscles seized shut at the sight before him. Instinctually,

the others turned as well. Johnny was standing between Lauriann and Daphne while Malik and Washi stood on the outsides, all looking into the sinister eyes of their fate. Sure death was upon them.

Johnny felt like running, or pulling out his camping knife, or grabbing a stick for protection, or, as his books had told him, making as much noise and ruckus as possible to scare off the impending danger, but he could not do any of those things. His body was trapped by fear, cold, icy terror that had frozen him to the spot. His friends, too, stood motionless.

Before them, not ten feet away, reared on its hind legs, stood the mother of the cubs. She was obviously angry over their intrusion. Her mouth was slightly open, showing a mouthful of sharp teeth. Opening her jaws widely she released a bawling sound that vibrated through Johnny's immobile body. Warm, pungent air from her breath pushed against his face. In one short leap, she could easily be upon them.

She opened up her chest, making her 400-pound body look bigger. She closed her brown snout, clacking her teeth fiercely and growling. She lunged forward prepared to attack, her left paw with its short rounded claws ready to plunge into Johnny and his friends.

In a flash, Johnny's short life appeared before him. Everything he had dreamed about, everything he had hoped to be, would never come true now. He felt a sense of sadness wash over him. The face of his dog Lindberg appeared before Johnny as the bear moved in for the kill.

A ruckus in the bush caught Johnny's attention. The blur of grey, brown, and white flew across his vision. Just in front of Daphne, the image clearly defined itself. A wolf was standing on three legs, the forth lifted slightly off the ground. The wolf's ears were flattened down on its head, its eyes gleaming with awe-inspiring intensity and its lips wrinkled back to expose its sharp, dangerous fangs. A low, long warning growl made the bear stop in its tracks.

For a moment the bear was stunned. It then stood on its back legs and roared furiously warning the canine to back off. But this tiny dog-like animal growled viciously, lifting its lips even further, showing the



bear that those sharp fangs could easily sink deeply into her flesh. The bear's savage temper raged, her eyes blazing wildly toward the wolf. She pounded the ground with her paws and roared furiously trying to intimidate the wolf. But, unaided by a pack, this wolf, by virtue of the life force that burned within, held off the much larger bear. Poised to fight to the death for the friends that had saved its life the wolf's spirit, in that moment, was greater than the bear's.

Feelings, like a rushing waterfall, flowed through Johnny's body. He regained movement! He took a deep breath, his body starved for air.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" he shouted to the group. "This is our chance. Never say die!" When Johnny said "never say die!" everybody came to their senses and started to breathe again. "Follow me!"

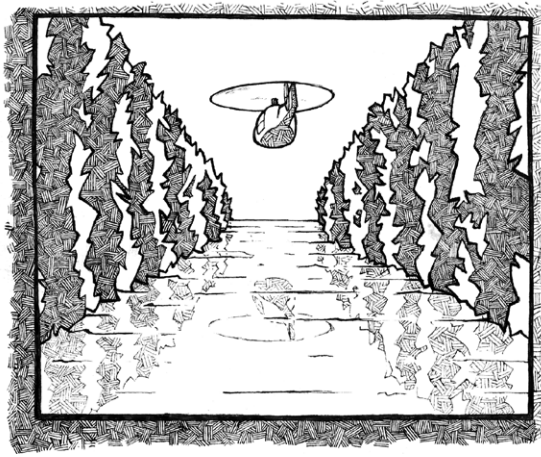
With strength far beyond any feat his body had ever achieved before, Johnny drew his arms in behind Lauriann's knees, picked her up, and carried her as fast as he could. He stopped about twenty metres away. As Daphne, Washi, and Malik passed them, Lauriann and Johnny took one last look at the wolf.

Satisfied that all would be okay, Johnny and Lauriann followed the group. Fuelled by pure adrenaline, they ran through the forest, leaping over broken branches, trekking through mud, and skirting around large trees, for what seemed like hours. Finally, they came to a clearing. They all collapsed on the ground, completely spent of energy and gasping for air.

After a few minutes, they caught their breath, only to be stirred by a strange, distant sound from above. Anxiously, and in hope, they listened as the sound grew louder until it was so loud they could not hear each other's cheers. Johnny jumped to his feet. Slowly, over the tree line, two long skis, which were attached to a bubble with a long tail, emerged. The flapping sounds and flickering sights of the aircraft's propellers told Johnny they were saved!

"We're here, we're here!" They all jumped and yelled, alerting their rescuers to their whereabouts. The helicopter landed. Johnny and

Washi lifted Lauriann in and the rest of the party followed.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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# REFLECTION

Exhilaration surged through Johnny as the helicopter floated upwards. Over the tips of the trees and into the sky they soared. Johnny did not peer down at the earth, toward the lakes, trails, rivers, trees, and animals; he did not look toward the past. Instead, he gazed up beyond the clouds, the moon, and the sun into the universe; his next destination, the future. A deeper part of him had opened and nothing could stop him now from making his goal of becoming an astronaut come true. He would never again say die to his dreams!

The helicopter descended and landed next to a Ranger Station. As the pilot cut the engine, all the adults and other kids rushed out to meet the aircraft's occupants. They were greeted with a great sigh of relief. Johnny and his friends had been the only ones still missing from the storm.

A paramedic cared for Lauriann's ankle and attended to the others' bruises. A hot meal was devoured quickly by Johnny and his friends. The camping party back intact, they loaded onto the bus, happy to be going home. Lauriann slid in beside Johnny as the bus pulled away down the bumpy dirt road that led to the highway.

“Look! Look!” screamed one of the kids, pointing wildly at the front of the bus. “A bear! There’s a bear running down the road!”

All of the kids pressed their faces against the windows on the driver’s side of the bus, trying to catch a glimpse of the black bear as it scurried alongside the road. Everyone that is except for Johnny and his friends.

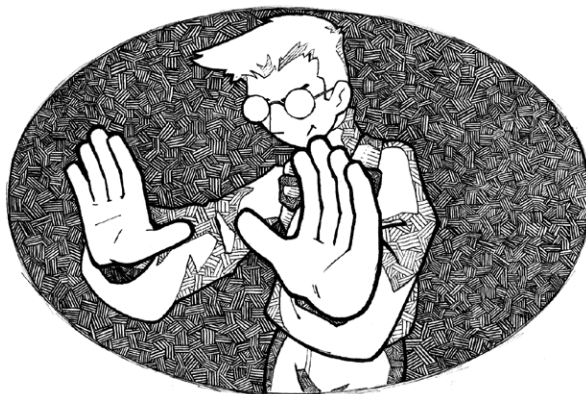
Janice, who was sitting in the seat in front of Johnny and Lauriann, turned around. “Johnny! Lauriann! Don’t you want to see the bear?” She immediately pressed her nose back against the window so as not to miss more than a second of action.

Lauriann looked at Johnny and they both smiled, but they did not gawk at the bear. The bus continued down the road, shaking and bouncing from the potholes. When it turned onto the smooth, paved road, Lauriann fell asleep. Her head rested on Johnny’s shoulder as she slept. Content, Johnny looked out the window. The cars zooming by in the opposite direction made him think about how important a place like Algonquin Park was. Yes, someday he wanted to pilot a huge metal machine into the galaxy to discover new worlds, but he also held a deep sense of importance for the natural world of Algonquin Park.

Over the course of a few short days, the park, in its infinite wisdom, had taught him about leadership, fear, disappointment, courage, self-esteem, challenge, determination, and trust. Somehow, Algonquin Park was a reflection of Johnny’s inner world, of all his hopes, dreams, fears, and insecurities. The lessons he had learned within its confines were deep and affecting.

He thought about the wolf. What if he and his friends hadn’t set it free? A shiver tingled up his spine. They would surely be dead right now. Then another question, one that was just as scary, came to his mind. What if the people of the world did not save and protect places like Algonquin Park?

Johnny’s eyes grew heavy as he pondered these plights and he drifted off to sleep.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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# COURAGE

Johnny jumped a hedge and ran up to Lauriann's front door. He knocked loudly, excited to get on with the day. Her father answered.

"Hello, Johnny, how are you?"

"I'm great, sir!" Johnny said, breathing heavily from running.

"Sounds like you had quite an experience in Algonquin! I'm happy you're okay."

"Thanks. Is Lauriann ready for school?" Johnny asked.

Spurred by the commotion at the door, Lauriann slowly made her way down the stairs. "Here I am! Let's go!" Lauriann gave her father a kiss then she, still dependent on crutches, and Johnny made their way to school.

It had been a week since they had returned from Algonquin Park. After learning of his great adventure and happy to have Johnny safely back home, his mother had relented on his punishment and said that he could go back to taking part in road hockey, playing computer games, and watching television. He was no longer grounded, but Johnny had done none of those things. Instead, every day after school, he had rushed up to his room to do research on his computer and practice his

presentation. Today was the big day.

"Are you ready, Johnny?" Lauriann asked excitedly.

"Yep, I'm ready!" he boasted.

"Are you nervous?" Lauriann asked, not fooled by his bravado.

Johnny thought for a moment and admitted, "A little, I guess."

"Oh no!" Lauriann said, alerting Johnny to approaching danger.

Johnny could see Mitch walking toward them. Their nemesis approached and stood right in Johnny and Lauriann's path.

"Well, if it isn't weakling and weakling's girlfriend," Mitch snarled.

"We don't want any trouble, Mitch." Johnny raised his hands in front of himself as back-off gesture. Lauriann stood behind him.

"We don't want any trouble, Mitch," Mitch mimicked and laughed. He slapped Johnny's hands down.

Johnny confidently raised them up again. He pursed his lips and said in a low and serious tone, "Back off, Mitch."

At first, Mitch did not say anything in response, like he was surprised at Johnny's confidence. After a moment, however, he yelled, "Give me your money, loser, or I'll kill you!"

Johnny repeated forcefully, "Back off, Mitch!"

"Or what—?"

"Now!" Johnny said, his lip pulled back to show his teeth clenched in determination. After the terror he had faced at Algonquin, he was no longer afraid of Mitch. Johnny thought about what Washi had told him, *His spirit is no greater than yours*. A vision of the small wolf, standing defiantly on three legs in front of the big bear, appeared before him. "I said now!"

Before Johnny's very eyes, Mitch's spirit seemed to cower and his body cringed. Mitch backed away a few steps, but called Johnny names as a cover up. "You're nothing but a loser!" Mitch raised his fists up toward Johnny and shouted even louder, "I could take you out any day of the week." Mitch drew his fist back as though ready to strike Johnny.

Johnny took one step forward and said, through clenched teeth,

“Back off, Mitch.”

“You’re nothing but a weakling...” And as those words fell out of Mitch’s quivering lips, he turned and walked away.

Lauriann dropped her crutches and grabbed Johnny from behind in a huge bear hug. “That was awesome!” she said.

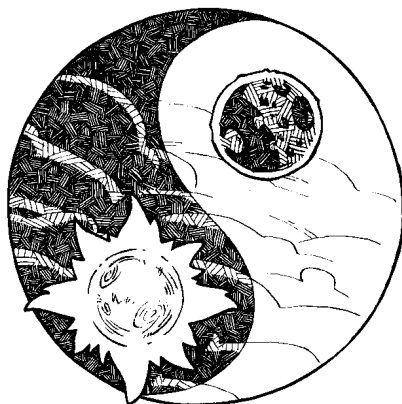
“Thanks, Lauriann. Washi told me how to do that. Then the wolf showed me.”

“You’re a real life Hero!” Lauriann said.

As they walked the rest of the way to school together, Johnny talked about his presentation. “My mom said that if I want people to listen, I have to grab their attention right away.”

Her ears perked up in response. “What are you going to do?” Lauriann asked excitedly.

“That’s a surprise,” Johnny said slyly, leaving Lauriann in suspense.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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# MOVEMENT

The class was silent as Johnny walked to the front of the room to make his presentation. Something strange happened, however, when he got in front of everyone. He turned, looked at his classmates who were all expectantly watching him, and was struck by fear. His mind went blank and his mouth felt frozen shut. For some reason, this situation was scarier than Mitch or even the bear, and he didn't know why. He knew his presentation forwards and backwards, but for some reason, his mind felt empty. He was standing in front of everybody like a bumbling fool, unable to do anything. If he were going to save himself, he needed to move.

Somehow his arms rose and opened up his notes. Still deathly afraid, he looked toward Mrs. Churney, who was sitting at the back of the class, and calculated the distance. Then he did something that came so automatically to him that even fear could not stop its production. He folded the paper six times into an airplane. All of the students looked shocked as he flung his arm forward, sending the airplane soaring toward the back of the room. His calculations proved perfect. It did two full loops and then landed square on Mrs. Churney's desk. Pleased



with the success of his mission, his mind was now fully engaged and ready to go.

Mrs. Churney dropped her pen on the table and folded her arms in front of her. She looked upset. Johnny knew that the only reason he was not on his way to the principal's office right now was because of what he had been through at Algonquin Park. Still, her face showed that she would not tolerate any further disobedience or "tomfoolery." Johnny's leeway had reached its end. The students watched Johnny, wide-eyed and attentive, as if wondering what he was going to do next.

"Mrs. Churney and class, that paper airplane came from a piece of paper cut from the Algonquin forest." Johnny paused for effect. He was still nervous but moving made it easier to speak. He used his arms and hands to emphasize his words. "Before Algonquin was a Provincial Park, the British pushed into this new land and found the White Pines. These trees were sixty metres tall with trunks so big that four men grabbing hands could not make a ring around one of them!"

Johnny went on to explain how the industrial revolution had created a need in Britain to build ships that would extend trade around the world. The tall pines in Algonquin were perfect for that need. The students sat attentively when he explained how, in spring, the rivers of Algonquin became swelling highways that served to move the timbers downstream. "Of course, the railroad industry wasn't far behind, which made the work of moving lumber much more efficient and safer. In short," Johnny continued, "human ingenuity was developing at astounding rates."

Mrs. Churney leaned forward, resting her elbows on her desk. She was not grading, or even just listening; she was learning. Johnny explained how that fast growth had started a conflict between loggers, who clear-cut part of the park, and the environmentalists, who wanted to preserve the trees. Each had strong reasons. The loggers wanted to protect the land from developers while the environmentalists gave compelling arguments about preservation.

"In an attempt to please both parties, Algonquin Park was created

in 1893 by the Algonquin Park Act, which stated it was, ‘to preserve the headwaters of the watersheds; to preserve the native forest; to protect game and fur-bearing animals, fish, and birds; to provide an area for forestry experimentation; to serve as a health resort and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage, and enjoyment of the people of the province.’”

Johnny pulled out a red, yellow, and orange maple leaf and held it up. “In the spring, a tree gave life to this leaf in Algonquin Park. Then all summer long, this leaf caught the sun’s light and made the tree stronger, healthier. As fall approached, the leaf returned all its remaining minerals to the tree so that it might live throughout the winter to start all over again. As human beings, we must understand our connection to the delicate nature of the planet and its inhabitants in the same way the leaf understands its connection to the tree.

“Between the loggers and the environmentalists, I cannot clearly choose a side. Both have valid points. I want to be an astronaut. The planet will have to support that dream with natural resources so I may get there. But like the leaf, I must give back to the world so it can continue to thrive for many years into the future. With the light of my mind, heart, and spirit, I want to leave the world stronger and healthier than I found it.

“It all comes down to one word.” Johnny paused for a moment. All the students and Mrs. Churney were waiting anxiously to hear what the word was.

“Mrs. Churney, would you please unfold the airplane on your desk.”

Mrs. Churney unfolded the airplane and nodded her head approvingly. She stood and turned the paper around for everybody to see. On it, Johnny had written one word in big bold letters: Balance.

“Thank you,” Johnny said as he folded up his papers and went back to his seat.

First, Mrs. Churney stood and applauded; then the whole class followed.

Johnny had a seat and thought about being an astronaut. As he did

so, the vision was crystal clear. Somehow his motives had changed over the past few weeks. Before the trip to Algonquin Park, he had wanted to soar out into the universe as an escape from school, from Mitch, and from all of his insecurities. With that behind him, he still wanted to jet out into the universe, but now it was to discover new worlds, maybe even intelligent worlds! Johnny looked at Lauriann who was gazing toward him admiringly. Maybe she would come with him.

