

Return to the Lands Beyond

By Katie Fo

6th grade, Summa Academy (South)

There was, not very long ago, a girl named Melinda, who was exactly ten and three-quarters years old but felt that she could not be any more grown up. She never really was interested in anything, but this was normal for those like her.

“What a terribly boring day,” Melinda said to herself as she had many times before, climbing the ladder up into the cool, dark attic. “There’s nothing to do and no one to do nothing with,” she complained while walking by a stack of colorful old books. Unhappily, she sat down on a storage box with her chin in her hands, ignoring the world.

Her spell of boredom was almost unbreakable, until a strangely-shaped package in the corner caught her eye. A handwritten note was attached to the top. She stood up, roughly lifted the package and sat down again, resting it in her lap. She noticed immediately how oddly heavy it was. Melinda couldn’t resist reading the puzzling message, written in gentle, looping script.

Sadly, for reason unknown, this important, clever object has been taken away from the world. Children can no longer visit those mysterious lands and discover what they need to know; maybe the world is different because they have grown up not knowing. But I leave this message with a hope that perhaps some boy or girl will find the Tollbooth, somehow. Whoever finds it will surely find the way, and will always have the time.

--Milo

At first, she wanted to ignore the message and never think about it again, but something suddenly made Melinda curious about the box; perhaps it was the part of her that wasn’t really grown up and still wanted to explore. She carefully tore off the rough brown paper covering the package to find that it has an envelope hanging from its left side. Melinda opened the message, her heart racing and her eyes wide with astonishment.

Slowly, she pulled the letter out, breathing hard, and caught a glimpse of the first few words: ONE GENUINE TURNPIKE TOLLBOOTH. Below that were the instructions for building and using it, which seemed rather ridiculous, especially that peculiar map marked with countries Melinda had never heard of and, she assumed, were not real places. She followed the directions mindlessly, only thinking of the message and why all of this might have happened to her.

Soon, a large, purple, box-shaped object stood before Melinda. Holding her breath, she picked up one of the coins that was included and dropped the rest, as well as the tiny books and papers that also came in the package, into the pocket of her jeans. The small bronze coin felt cool and solid in her hand as she placed it gently into the deposit box on the booth.

Melinda took a step past the tollbooth, and a warm wind rushed by. The attic swirled around her, and she found herself on a quiet country road. Before she could even try to imagine what kind of magic had brought her there, a huge, man-sized dog rushed toward her, barreling along on four giant paws. She also noticed an odd ticking sound – was it coming from the brown, furry beast? Jolting the girl from her confused thoughts, the dog suddenly spoke in a low, gruff voice that was still quite comforting.

“Finally, you have come. Welcome.”

Melinda said nothing. There was an uncomfortable silence.

“You have found the way, somehow, so I congratulate you,” said the dog, cocking his head to the side. Then he straightened up. “My name is Tock, and I am a watchdog. There hasn’t been a visitor here for quite some time. Many years, in fact.”

“I don’t even want to know...” Melinda grumbled.

“You shouldn’t say that here. It is against the law in this Kingdom of Wisdom,” Tock said, “Because not wanting to know usually leads to not learning. And not learning usually leads to not doing anything. And not doing anything always leads to wasting time, which, in my opinion, is a serious problem.” Tock’s alarm rang loudly. He clearly has a very strong opinion about that.

“So, what should I do?” Melinda asked uncertainly.

“I suggest going on to Dictionopolis,” the watchdog barked cheerfully. “Don’t just stand around wasting time. Also – I would really like to come with you.”

“I just don’t care for words,” Melinda admitted as they neared the gate to enter Dictionopolis. She had hoped that a magical adventure would involve things she was interested in, not her least favorite school subjects.

Tock started to say something, but he was interrupted by a loud booming voice.

“You currently are entering Dictionopolis,” announced a towering armored guard staring down at them. Melinda expected him to ask the two travelers a question, but he simply opened the gate and motioned for them to go through it.

Inside the walls there was a city square full of people talking loudly. When Tock and Melinda got closer, they discovered that they were using very odd words.

“I am flabbergasted and bibliophiled by your insolent, impenetrable behavior!” scolded one woman. Some other citizens seemed to make even less sense, and Melinda thought that some of the words couldn’t possibly be real.

“Why are they all talking so strangely?” whispered Melinda after she and Tock were greeted with a hearty “Kolytugh thuredsw!”

“No listens to Reason any more here. They only listen to what others are saying and then copy it. Now no one can communicate at all,” Tock said glumly. “It really has become a problem.”

“Well, someone has got to give them a reality check,” Melinda decided, putting her hands on her hips. “They can’t go on saying nonsense forever. Why do they do this, anyway?” She knew the answer to her question: it was because the words were so very popular. Melinda did nearly the same thing at school, using very odd expression that meant nothing, and sometimes she thought that the other kids said their share of nonsense words.

“There is no point, actually,” said Tock. “They’ll just go on saying something else if you try to stop them. Ever since the visitors stopped coming, the Demons of Ignorance keep invading, no matter what the princesses do.”

“I suppose there’s nothing we can do,” sighed Melinda, with no clue as to who the Demons of Ignorance or the princesses were. “But wait – I’m a visit-”

A discordant trumpet fanfare sounded as many voices shouted, “The Word Market is now open!” All over the square, merchants set up stands advertising all sorts of words. There was a large cart for “Formal Words,” and another for “Everyday Words,” and even a stand full of “Scary Story Words.” Melinda was fascinated by the many things to buy, as she was in her regular life, but Tock urged her away toward the city gates. “We need to go. Besides, you don’t have any Dictionopolis money. And-”

Tock never finished, because a huge, beetle-like creature wearing a dapper hat and suit strode in front of him. They seemed to recognize each other, and Tock stepped back a bit. The beetle-thing greeted Tock warmly and tipped his hat.

“So, Humbug,” barked Tock happily. “Finally we have a visitor.”

“How did you find the tollbooth?” asked the Humbug abruptly, turning away from the watchdog. “Where did you get it? Did you have to buy it? How much did it cost?”

“I guess it was from my grandfather, Milo, and um,” stammered Melinda.

“Your grandfather, Milo?” the two friends exclaimed in astonishment. There was a moment of stunned silence.

“It is one thing to get a visitor after so long, but Milo’s granddaughter...,” said Tock in disbelief, leading the other two out of the gates.

“Is the second thing!” finished the Humbug cheerily, saying, as usual, the exactly wrong thing to say. “I wonder why no one finishes their sentences anymore.”

The trio wandered northwards for quite a while, talking, laughing, and finding strange people along their path, each one weirder than the last. The oddest curiosity of all, however, was that everyone they met seemed to be heading north as well, so they gathered a few companions for the trip; the Duke of Definition, the Minister of Meaning, and the Undersecretary of Understanding, who always traveled, journeyed, and voyaged together, the C-L-E-V-E-R Spelling Bee, and even the Soundkeeper, who had brought along some very nice sounds to listen to. It was quite a procession.

“The reason for all of this is the convention,” mused Tock. “Why didn’t I think of that before?” He turned to Melinda. “All the important people in the kingdom meet every year to discuss things.”

The group trekked through the forest for what seemed like weeks until, finally, they reached the meeting hall in the city of Digitopolis. Some of them were excited, the Dictionopolians grumbled, and Melinda started getting bored again, because she had little interest in math. However, they were all confused by the sight of several plane shapes walking by.

“Why did those triangles smile at me?” asked Melinda.

“They only have one face,” explained Tock, “Which means that some can only smile.”

He said nothing more after they entered the Convention Hall, a huge room with chairs crowding it from wall to wall. Melinda looked up to see murals depicting the history of the kingdom, from the settlement to the two cities’ founding to – Melinda gasped – Milo’s rescue of Rhyme and Reason.

Without warning, a powerful voice boomed out across the room, which was now filled with people. “Hi! Hello! Greetings! Salutations! The Official Convention of the Kingdom of Wisdom has now begun!” announced a large man, who Melinda assumed to be a king. “The first announcement is that a visitor has somehow found her way here.” The crowd cheered. “This visitor will bring peace to our land again by defeating all of the terrible Demons of Ignorance,” he continued proudly. Melinda thought this was expecting a bit much, but what the king said next was even more terrifying: “And now, she will make a speech about her first visit to this land.”

Melinda stepped down the narrow aisle, frantically trying to think of something to say in front of this huge congregation. Around her, strange roaring and whining voices came out of the buzzing crowd, which at first she thought were only her imagination, but she soon discovered that they belonged to dozens of hideous creatures. “*The Demons of Ignorance*,” Melinda whispered under her breath, panicking. “*All of them.*” Suddenly she realized how she could stop them.

“Er-um-LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” began Melinda clumsily when she reached the podium. “I have only recently discovered your, like, country.” She could see several demons creeping nearer out of the corner of her eye. “I have made some really awesome friends, and have learned things I never would have learned otherwise, thanks to all of you.”

“I used to not really want to know things, and, well, everything seemed so boring. But now, I’ve found out just how important it is to be curious.” The crowd rumbled in acknowledgment and a few demons who had apparently dedicated their lives to boredom dashed out of the room. Melinda smiled knowingly and said more forcefully, “I’ll always think now, and not just ignore the world, like I used to.” More demons were alarmed and escaped after a booming burst of applause.

“Most of all, I will always try not to waste time,” Melinda concluded, smiling at Tock, “For it has really become a problem.” As the crowd roared in agreement, the rest of the demons screamed eerily and nearly attacked, but, as cowardly creatures, fled instead from the girl who so boldly spoke against them. “I have to leave now, but I hope that I can visit again someday.” She took a bow.

The crowd gave Melinda a standing ovation and cheered for a full ten minutes. Several of her new friends came to congratulate her for ridding the land of demons. “Now, are the demons going to be gone, forever?” she asked, astonished. “From...everywhere?”

“Yes, and no,” replied Tock. “They are gone from this land, but you have to remove them from yours some other way.” The crowd cheered Melinda’s name loudly.

“I know I’ll try.” She rubbed Tock’s furry head and bid him and the Humbug farewell.

After many more sad goodbyes, Melinda returned home to find that she had only been gone an hour. Everywhere, she noticed things to do where she had seen nothing before. Though Melinda’s ordinary life no long seemed so ordinary, she still wished to be back in the Kingdom of Wisdom again. But since the tollbooth hadn’t been used for so long, it was someone else’s turn now.

“Ruby!” Melinda called, and her little sister came to greet her. She was jumping up and down wildly, but today that didn’t bother her in the least. She just smiled and took her sister’s small hand, realizing that she was trying to appear taller by hopping.

“You know,” Melinda said softly, “It’s okay. You don’t need to grow up so fast.” The older girl looked out the window wistfully while the younger stared, obviously confused. Melinda chuckled, “Never mind that.”

“Come with me.” The older sister paused, remembering. “There’s something in the attic I should show you.”