

Fifth Grade Magic

by Beatrice Gormley

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Back to the *Titanic!*
Back to Paul Revere!
Back to the Day Lincoln Was Shot!

to my husband, Bob
and
to my fairy godmother, Jane

1. The Rear View

Gretchen nudged Beth. “Look at Mrs. Sheppard,” she whispered. “She looks like a hippopotamus.”

Beth glanced up from her fractions work sheet. “Good grief,” she muttered. “You mean a *hippobottomus*.”

Choking on a giggle, Gretchen gazed at the teacher, who was pinning papers on the bulletin board. Mrs. Sheppard liked to be in style, but this time she had picked the wrong style. She was wearing a gray skirt-like thing, really wide-legged knee-length pants. It made her seem—well, a lot larger than she was. “She must not have looked in the mirror this morning.”

“I guess she didn’t have a *rearview* mirror,” said Beth. They had to cover their mouths to keep from laughing out loud.

Mrs. Sheppard looked over her shoulder, frowning at Gretchen and Beth’s side of the classroom. “Let’s keep our eyes and our thoughts on our work, people.” Then a pushpin dropped from her hand, and she bent over to pick it up.

As the teacher fumbled for the pushpin, looking even more like a *hippobottomus*, Gretchen heard someone whisper, “Ready—aim—fire!” It was Dennis Boyd, leaning out of his seat and aiming his pencil like a dart at Mrs. Sheppard.

Now the whole class was giggling. But Mrs. Sheppard, straightening to face them, didn’t seem to have any idea what the joke was. She swept the class with a stern look. “We have some exciting news to talk about, but not until after your math work sheets are done. And no fairy godmother is going to wave her wand and solve the problems for you—you have to work them yourselves.”

Mrs. Sheppard was always saying things like that. Gretchen wished a fairy godmother *would* appear, just to show the teacher up. Right in front of the chalkboard, waving her sparkly wand. *Bing!*—everyone’s math problems solved.

Gretchen had already worked the last problem, anyway. While she waited for the others to finish their work sheets, she took a piece of scratch paper and began to doodle. Without thinking about it, she drew a person . . . the rear view . . . a woman wearing silly-looking skirt/pants. In fact, Gretchen realized, it was quite a good picture of Mrs. Sheppard, complete with upswept hairdo and with her head turned sideways to show her big glasses.

Putting down her pencil, Beth glanced over at what Gretchen was doing. Her eyes popped open wide, and a grin spread over her face. She mouthed silently, “That’s really good, Gretchen!”

Gretchen thought so, too. She signed her name at the bottom of the picture, the way artists do. Then the girl on the other side of Beth poked her, wanting to see what was so interesting, and Beth slide the picture along the table to her. Gretchen heard a gasp and a smothered giggle.

“Everyone finished?” Mrs. Sheppard stood in front of the chalkboard, chalk in hand. “Very good—that’s the kind of effort I like to see. Now for the fun. It’s time to start working on the spring play!”

Gretchen sat up straight. At last! The fifth grade play. She had been waiting all year for this. And she was prepared. In the drama club, which Gretchen had started a few weeks ago, she and the other girls practiced acting at recess.

The teacher was writing the title of the play on the chalkboard: *Polly’s Pies in Peril*. “We’re going to put on an old-fashioned melodrama, people,” she said, “In a melodrama, the audience can boo at the villain and cheer for the hero, which is such fun! Of course, we won’t want to overdo it.” Mrs. Sheppard smiled. Then she noticed Kathy, in the middle of the room, raising her hand. “Yes. What is it, Kathy?”

“I was just wondering, Mrs. Sheppard—are you going to direct the play this year?”

That was a good question, thought Gretchen. This was Mrs. Sheppard’s first year of teaching fifth grade—she was really a second grade teacher. She might not know anything about direction plays. But Ms. DiGrassi, the other fifth grade teacher, had been in charge of the play for years.

“Oh, no.” Mrs. Sheppard spoke hastily. “Ms. DiGrassi will direct the play. But I’m going to help her with the casting this afternoon, since she doesn’t know most of you. And I want you to help me, people, by letting me know what you would like to do to make this the best spring play ever.” She paused to give Amy, the new girl sitting next to Kathy, an encouraging smile.

All right, thought Gretchen. Amy’s been here since January—you don’t have to baby her anymore.

“I’ll list the characters and the backstage jobs on the board,” Mrs. Sheppard went on, “and everyone who wants to work on the play, please write down your first, second, and third choices.”

As the teacher began to write on the board, Gretchen saw a boy at the next table pass a piece of scratch paper to his neighbor, grinning and pointing at Mrs. Sheppard’s back. It must be Gretchen’s picture. She felt uneasy—she hadn’t meant to let it get passed all over the class.

Now the other boy was holding the picture up, and Gretchen caught a glimpse of it. Oh, no. Something new had been added. Circles, one inside the other, like a dartboard target, drawn over the teacher’s backside! Gretchen jumped up to grab the picture, but just then Mrs. Sheppard turned around. She sank back.

“You see, class, Winnie Winsum, the mother, has a little pie shop in her home. The heroine of the play is her beautiful daughter, Polly. . . .”

As Mrs. Sheppard talked, Gretchen forgot about the picture. The classroom seemed to fade away, and Gretchen saw herself on the stage at the end of the gym. The spotlight was on her, Polly Winsum, in her old-fashioned dress with a long, ruffled skirt. So beautiful, so good. In dreadful danger from the villainous Cadmun Blackheart.

A snicker from the middle of the room brought Gretchen out of her daydream. Her picture had traveled all the way over to Kathy! Gretchen made frantic motions to Kathy to hide the picture, but Kathy didn’t seem to notice. She giggled out loud.

Mrs. Sheppard turned from the board again with a frown. Cutting off her giggle suddenly, Kathy slipped the piece of paper to Amy. But it was plain that Mrs. Sheppard had seen her do it. Gretchen felt her stomach sink.

“Kathy, I thought we all agreed at the beginning of the year that there was to be no note passing.”

Kathy blinked innocently. “I wasn’t passing notes, Mrs. Sheppard.”

Gretchen wished with all her might that she could run time backwards, like film in a projector. Then the picture would pass from Amy to Kathy, to the boys at the next table, to the girl on the other side of Beth, to Beth, and at last back to Gretchen, who would un-draw her hippobottomus portrait of Mrs. Sheppard.

But time did not roll magically backwards. The picture was still in front of Amy, who as gaping as if it were a hand grenade. Nervously she twisted a lock of her long blonde hair.

With a jab Mrs. Sheppard pushed her pink-lensed glasses up on her nose. “Amy, please bring that paper to me.” She added more gently, “Of course I’m not blaming *you*.”

Now Gretchen was going to get it. Why had she let them pass the picture around? Why, oh, *why* had she signed her name?

Mrs. Sheppard took the picture from Amy and stared at it, pressing her lips together tightly. Her eyes rested for an instant at the bottom of the picture, narrowing. Then she crumpled the paper and dropped it in the wastebasket. Not even looking in Gretchen’s direction, the teacher glanced at the clock. “Time to line up for lunch. It’s outside recess today, people, so take your sweaters and jackets.”

It was the best kind of day you could expect in March—cold, but bright and not too windy. At recess, Gretchen and Beth and Kathy and the other girls in the drama club gathered near the edge of the woods that bordered the playing field. Here the ground rose a few feet into a flat-topped knoll, useful for a stage.

“Kathy, thanks a lot for getting me into trouble,” said Gretchen.

“Yeah,” said Beth. “That wasn’t too bright.”

“Me—?” Kathy sputtered. “*I* didn’t draw that picture of Mrs. Sheppard. *I* didn’t pass it around. Anyway,” she went on in a reasonable tone, “you didn’t get into any trouble. Mrs. Sheppard didn’t do anything.”

“She didn’t do anything *yet*,” said Beth. “She might be thinking up some fate worse than death.”

“Oh, well,” said Gretchen. She was still irritated with Kathy, but she didn’t want to spend the recess arguing. She looked around at the others. “Let’s start the scene. Hey, wasn’t it a good thing we’ve been practicing acting? I knew the play was coming up soon.” She took a paperback book from the pocket of her jacket. “This time Beth can be the spy, and—”

“Just a minute.” Kathy motioned toward another group of girls, playing foursquare on the paved space near the building. “Why don’t we ask Amy if she wants to be in the drama club? She’d be good.”

Gretchen raised her eyebrows. “Amy Sacher? What makes you think—”

But the other girls were murmuring. “Yeah, let’s ask Amy.” “It would be nice—she’s new.” “I wish I had long blonde hair like hers.” “She’s going to be a model, you know.”

“Good grief,” said Beth to Gretchen. But Kathy was already trotting across the field, dodging the boys playing soccer. She waved at Amy, standing in the foursquare line.

Gretchen tried again. “Let’s get started, anyway.” But the others paid no attention. They were squinting into the bright sunlight, watching Kathy talk to Amy.

From this distance the most noticeable thing about the two girls was their long hair, Kathy’s dark and Amy’s blonde. Strands of it blew across their faces as they talked. Gretchen saw that they were both wearing their hair pulled back with big barrettes. Was Amy copying Kathy, or the other way around?

After a moment’s conversation, Amy shook her head. Kathy said something, shrugged, and trotted back toward the drama club.

The group waited expectantly as Kathy ran up, panting. “Amy said she’d rather play foursquare.”

“Fine,” said Gretchen, jumping up on the rise. “Let’s stop wasting time. If Beth’s the spy, then—”

“I’m sort of tired of acting myself,” said Kathy loudly. “I don’t see why we have to practice anymore when we’re going to be doing the play in school.” She stared at Gretchen. “I think I’ll start a new foursquare game.”

“Me too,” said one of the girls.

“Hey, yeah, let’s all play foursquare!” Another girl stopped and glance apologetically at Gretchen. “It’s getting kind of boring, just acting every day.”

Boring! Gretchen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You can’t be good actors without practicing.”

But they were all drifting after Kathy, who was halfway across the playground again.

Gretchen watched them go, her teeth clenched. Then she looked down from the rise at Beth, the only remaining member of the drama club. “Don’t you want to play foursquare?” she asked bitterly.

“It might be fun for a change,” said Beth in a soothing tone. But she made no move to go.

Gretchen kicked at the winter-brown grass, making heel marks in the damp ground. “They’re so stupid. I don’t know why they think Amy’s so great, with her sweetie-sweet smile. And they don’t even care that much about the spring play!” Her voice rose in disbelief. “I’ve been thinking about being in the play ever since I was in kindergarten!”

“Really?” Beth sounded sympathetic but surprised. “I don’t even remember what play they put on when we were in kindergarten.”

“It was *Cinderella*,” said Gretchen. “Kathy’s older sister was the fairy godmother, and the star fell of her wand. Don’t you remember that?”

“Oh, yeah.” Beth giggled. “Anyway, the play for this year sounds pretty good. *Polly’s Pies in Peril*. What part did you ask for?”

“Polly Winsum,” said Gretchen without hesitating. Then she glanced sharply at Beth. Gretchen wanted very badly to play the heroine, but she would hate it if she beat out Beth for the part. “You didn’t—what part did you ask for?”

“Spotlight technician,” said Beth.

Gretchen’s jaw dropped. “But—but that isn’t even a part! Don’t you want to be in the play? I bet you could get the part of the mother, or the neighbor, at least.”

Beth shrugged. “I think I’d rather work the spotlight. I got tired of learning lines in the drama club. Anyway”—she grinned—“if I’m working the spotlight, I’ll shine it on you all the time.”

A warm feeling of friendship came over Gretchen. Beth wasn’t any more serious about acting than the other girls, but she had stuck by Gretchen anyway. “Okay, sounds good to me.” Gretchen stepped down from the rise. “We can’t act out a scene with only two people. I guess we might as well go play foursquare.”

2. A Celebrity in Our Midst

In school the next morning, the girls' coat closet smelled like vinyl slickers and damp wool. Wrinkling her nose, Gretchen tugged off her boots, added them to the line inside the closet, and padded to her table to put her shoes on. "Hi, Beth."

"Hi." Beth was twirling one of her brown braids, staring at the windows across the room. "Yuck. Inside recess."

Glancing up from her shoelaces, Gretchen saw the sleet sliding down the panes, blurring the dark, bare trees and dingy grass outside. "Oh, well," she said cheerfully. She took her pencil box out of her book bag, removed her special pencil with the fluffy end, and placed it on the table, reading to write. "At least we'll find out who gets which part in the play." She looked up at the chalkboard, where the characters and the backstage jobs were still listed. Polly Winsum, heroine.

"I wonder how Mrs. Sheppard will pick kids for the parts, though," said Beth thoughtfully. "She's never seen any of us act."

"No, but she could tell who would be a good actor from other things—like who reads with expression, who has a good loud voice, who doesn't mind getting up in front of the class. Things like that." Gretchen spoke confidently. She did all those things well.

By now the other children had taken their places at Gretchen and Beth's table, and the classroom was almost full. As the teacher opened her attendance book, Gretchen studied her face. Mrs. Sheppard *did* understand how to pick actors, didn't she? She would have to see that Gretchen should have a big part, anyway. But Gretchen didn't want just any big part—she wanted to play Polly Winsum, heroine.

A hand with small, slim fingers reached in front of Gretchen, stroking the fluffy end of her pencil. It was Amy. “That’s cute, Gretchen,” she said. “Your pencil looks like a weird little person, with those googly eyes.”

Picking up her pencil, Gretchen smoothed the tuft of orange fluff on the eraser end. “Thanks,” she said coolly. Amy might charm everyone else, but she wasn’t going to charm Gretchen. Not after breaking up the drama club.

Amy hesitated, as if she wanted to say something else, but now Mrs. Sheppard was raising her hand for silence. Amy hurried to her seat in the middle of the room.

Picking up a newspaper clipping from her desk, Mrs. Sheppard waved it in front of the class. “People, does everyone know we have a celebrity in our midst?” Beaming at Amy, she pushed her glasses up on her nose with one finger. “This article was in last night’s paper— ‘Modeling Career Launched.’ ”

As Mrs. Sheppard began to read the article out loud, everyone turned to look at Amy. Next to Amy, Kathy was almost jumping out of her seat with excitement. But Amy gazed down at the table, her eyelashes shadowing her cheeks.

Pretending to be modest, thought Gretchen. How sweet. Watching Mrs. Sheppard reading, she wondered, as she had wondered before, why anyone would wear glasses with pink lenses. They might be in style, but they made Mrs. Sheppard’s eyes look read and tired. “I see the world through rose-colored glasses,” Mrs. Sheppard had joked on the first day of school. Ha-ha, thought Gretchen. She certainly sees Amy through rose-colored glasses.

Pinning the article next to a picture of pussy willows on the bulletin board, Mrs. Sheppard picked up a stack of dictionaries. “Paper monitor—that’s you today, Kathy—pass out lined paper.” She moved among the tables, giving out the dictionaries. “Everyone copy the vocabulary words from your reader and look up each definition, Remember, people, practice your handwriting every time you write.”

The morning dragged on. Each time Mrs. Sheppard opened her mouth to speak to the class, Gretchen was sure she was going to announce the parts for the play. Her heart would start to race. But then Mrs. Sheppard would only call up another reading group.

Could Mrs. Sheppard have forgotten? Gretchen looked up from her paper of “Did You Understand?” reading questions. The teacher was walking up to the chalkboard. Gretchen decided to ask her about the play. “Mrs. Sheppard?”

But at the same moment, the teacher, said, “People, pencils down, all eyes on me. Please don’t interrupt, Gretchen. She looked around the classroom, chalk poised, until the murmuring died down. “Ms. DiGrassi and I got together yesterday after school and assigned responsibilities for *Polly’s Pies in Peril*.” She pointed to the name of the play at the top of the board. “Now, before I announce the parts and other jobs, I want to make it clear that there is no *unimportant* work to be done on the play. Every part, every job is important! If the spotlight technician”—Beth sat up straight—“doesn’t turn on the spotlight, the audience won’t see the heroine. If the townspeople who has only two lines doesn’t say them correctly, the villain won’t get his cue.” Mrs. Sheppard smiled brightly around the room. “Plays don’t happen by magic. We’ll all have to work our hardest.”

Gretchen twiddled her fluffy-ended pencil. Yes, we know, Mrs. Sheppard. Plays don’t happen by magic. Just announce the parts!

But now, finally, the teacher was writing names next to the list of characters and backstage jobs. “Winnie Winsum, the mother, is Jennifer Bell, from Ms. DiGrassi’s class. The Winsums’ neighbor will be Kathy. Spotlight technician—Beth McEvoy.”

Beth turned to Gretchen, mouth open in delight. She bounced in her seat.

Gretchen smiled and shrugged. If that’s what made Beth happy—

“Polly Winsum—Amy Sacher.”

Mrs. Sheppard’s words punched Gretchen in the stomach, making her gasp. She stared disbelievingly at the teacher, who was beaming over her shoulder at Amy as she wrote.

Amy turned to Kathy with a big smile, clapping silently. Now Mrs. Sheppard was writing on the other side of the board. “Scenery manager—Gretchen Nichols. This work will make use of Gretchen’s artistic ability.” Somebody in the back snickered, but Mrs. Sheppard didn’t look at Gretchen or smile.

Mrs. Sheppard hates me, thought Gretchen.

She felt as if the teacher had slapped her in the face. A teacher couldn’t make decisions, like who got which parts in a play, according to likes and dislikes.

But that’s just what Mrs. Sheppard was doing.

It was one thing for Gretchen, who was a kid, to pass a funny picture of Mrs. Sheppard around the class. It was another thing for Mrs. Sheppard, the grown-up teacher, to shut Gretchen out of the play.

How could she?

The teacher went on writing and talking, but the buzz of comments and laughter seemed far away from Gretchen, as if she were in a glass booth. Polly Winsum—Amy Sacher. Scenery manager—Gretchen Nichols. She felt a trembling inside, as if she might scream right out in class, “It’s not fair!” To keep the scream down, she squeezed her hands together hard, clasping her wispy-headed pencil between them.

“Cadmun Blackheart,” Mrs. Sheppard was saying. “The banker—and what else is he, people?”

“The villain,” said several boys and girls.

“Right! Cadmun Blackheart—Dennis Boyd.”

Gretchen glanced up Dennis pretended to fall off his chair in horror. There were whistles and cheers around the classroom, and the boy sitting next to Dennis punched his shoulder. “Oh, Dennis is a bad, bad man!”

Shaking his blond forelock out of his eyes, Dennis called out, “I said I wanted to be a stagehand!”

Calmly Mrs. Sheppard said, “I think you’ll find you can really get into this part, Dennis.” Gretchen noticed that the teacher didn’t look at him, either. “Where was I? Oh—townspeople.”

“Dennis Boyd, the villain,” whispered Beth to Gretchen. “Typecasting!”

Gretchen couldn’t even smile. She stared down at her pencil, smoothing the fluffy orange hair straight up. The pupils of the plastic eyes wobbled, astonished.

Gretchen heard chalk squeaking on the board and Mrs. Sheppard’s voice going up and down, but she couldn’t bear to look at the board or listen to what the teacher was saying. She wished she never had to hear Mrs. Sheppard’s voice again. It’s not fair, she said silently to her pencil. I’ve been waiting for five years. I’ve even been practicing acting to get ready for the play!”

The pencil nodded sympathetically.

Amy just moved to town this winter! And she didn’t even want to join the drama club. And she gets her picture in the paper, and everyone’s so impressed with her. Why should she get the part?

The pencil didn’t know. It shook its head, baffled.

“Gretchen.”

Feeling a nudge from Beth, Gretchen looked up. Mrs. Sheppard had said her name.

“—understudy,” the teacher was saying. “So you have two important duties instead of just one.” She put her chalk down. “Time to line up for lunch, people. Leave your coats in the closet—inside recess today.”

“No kidding,” said Beth softly to Gretchen. She nodded at the sleet still streaking the windows.

Gretchen stood up, frowning at the board. “What did Mrs. Sheppard say about understudies?”

“She said you were the understudy for Polly Winsum. I’m the understudy for the mother.”

Gretchen looked away from the sympathy in Beth’s eyes. She would *not* cry in front of everybody, especially the teacher.

Turning from Beth, Gretchen joined the line forming at the door. To avoid meeting anyone’s eyes, she stared at the bulletin board beside her. Pussy willows. Papers with red-penciled A’s at the top. And a newspaper clipping: “Modeling Career Launched.”

Gretchen’s stomach tightened. She didn’t want to look at the newspaper picture, but she couldn’t pull her eyes away from it. It showed Amy, her long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders, sitting in front of a backdrop, smiling at the photographer. A lean, stylish-looking woman—she must be Amy’s mother—watched them with a pleased expression.

Amy’s modeling career was launched. Gretchen’s acting career was sunk.

Later that afternoon Gretchen plodded past the spruce trees beside her driveway. The sleet had turned into drizzle, but it had been a long, cold, wet walk, and her book bag dragged at her arm. At least now she could make herself a cup of cocoa and tell her mother what had happened. Gretchen pulled open the back door. “Mom?”

But even before she pushed back the hood of her slicker, Gretchen knew this was not the afternoon to look for sympathy. From the living room the vacuum cleaner whined urgently, and the kitchen reeked of some kind of sauce with wine in it—ugh. Mom wouldn’t be cooking and cleaning like this unless they were having company for dinner tonight. Well, that might not be so bad. Maybe it was Gretchen’s Aunt Marianne and her boyfriend Paul.

Unsnapping her slicker, Gretchen clumped through the laundry room and into the kitchen. “Mom?”

“Gretchen?” The noise of the vacuum cut off with a snarl, and her mother, wild haired, appeared in the doorway to the dining room. Gretchen’s baby brother Jason crawled up behind Mrs. Nichols and pulled himself upright, holding on to her leg. “Hi. I need your help, because—Gretchen! You go right back into the laundry room with those books! Here I am running around like a crazy person, trying to get the house cleaned up and fix something impressive for dinner and watch Jason, and you track in mud!”

A nice welcome, thought Gretchen, but she retreated to the laundry room. “Who’s coming—Marianne?” she called as she pulled her boots off.

“I wish it were,” said her mother. “I wouldn’t have to knock myself out for Marianne and Paul. It’s some business people Daddy invited to dinner tonight. And I couldn’t leave my office as soon as I hoped to, because I had a new client and had to go over his accounts with him and explain that I couldn’t magically solve *all* his problems for him. And this place is such a horrible MESS!”

As Gretchen stepped back into the kitchen, her mother went on, “Now *please* do not put your books down here. Take them right up to your room, and I mean your room, not just putting them on the stairs to take up later. And also take that sweater that’s been hanging on the back of the rocker for six days.” Mrs. Nichols pointed across the kitchen.

How could her mother talk to her like this? Not even “How was your day at school?” let alone “Did you get the part you wanted in the play?”

And her sweater *hadn’t* been there for six days. “I only left it there yesterday,” muttered Gretchen, snatching the sweater from the back of the rocker. She stuffed it into her book bag and charged at the stairs, swinging her leg over the baby gate.

“And after you put your things away, please come back downstairs and help tidy up,” called her mother. The giant-mosquito hum of the vacuum started up again.

As Gretchen reached the top of the stairs, she heard Jason begin to howl over the vacuum cleaner noise. Gretchen felt like howling herself. Mom would put Jason in the playpen and give him a teething biscuit, and he would be fine, but what about her?

Gretchen dropped her book bag on the floor of her room. Yes, what about Gretchen? What could she do? How could she stand it?

And especially, how could Mrs. Sheppard treat her like that? Gretchen had known, even before the teacher saw her drawing, that she wasn't Mrs. Sheppard's favorite pupil. But she never dreamed the teacher might do something that would hurt the play.

Now Gretchen began to see how the teacher might have been thinking. Mrs. Sheppard didn't know anything about plays or about who would be the best actor. All she knew was that she could do something nice for Amy by making her the heroine and punish Gretchen by not giving her any part in the play at all.

It was Gretchen, not Mrs. Sheppard, who had made the big mistake. If Gretchen had understood the teacher, she never would have drawn her rear view. . . . Well, anyway, she wouldn't have let it be passed around the class. She would have been polite and sweet to Mrs. Sheppard, starting in September. Oh, why hadn't she been?

But maybe it wouldn't have made any difference. Maybe Mrs. Sheppard would have chosen Amy anyway, because Amy was prettier.

That idea gave Gretchen an odd, helpless feeling. Stepping in front of the mirror over the dresser, she leaned forward to look into her own blue-gray eyes. Her ginger-colored hair, damp from walking home through the rain, curled over her forehead and around her ears.

No, she didn't look like the kind of girl who could be a model. She looked ordinary. But I'm not ordinary! Thought Gretchen. I'm—me!

She had to get someone to help her, maybe someone who could reason with Mrs. Sheppard.

But who?

"No fairy godmother is going to wave her wand and solve the problem for you," Mrs. Sheppard's voice seemed to say coldly in Gretchen's head.

"Yes, she is!" burst out Gretchen furiously. "Fair godmother, come on! It's me, Gretchen! Help!" And then she was surprised to find herself sobbing aloud.

She remembered how Mrs. Sheppard had looked right past her, as if she didn't exist. She remembered all the heads in the class turning toward Amy, as if she were a star already. Sitting down on her desk chair, Gretchen put her face in her hands and cried.

After a minute or two, in spite of feeling so awful, Gretchen wondered how she looked, crying like this. She raised her head to check the mirror.

She couldn't see the mirror!

Abruptly Gretchen stopped crying and sat up. She couldn't see the mirror because there was something in front of it. A fuzzy image, like an out-of-focus picture from a movie projector, had appeared in the middle of Gretchen's room. It looked more solid than a movie, although Gretchen could see the outline of her dresser behind it.

"Errora to the rescue!" shouted a high, faraway voice.

Gretchen wiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. Blinking, she watched the picture grown sharper. It was a small, round-faced woman, no taller than Gretchen. Her baggy, drab blue skirt flapped around her ankles, and her baggy, drab blue jacket was rolled up at the sleeves. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and topped with a blue visored cap, and she carried something that looked like a calculator.

Smiling as if she were very pleased with herself, the woman said, "Agent Errora, designated representative to Sector 87. It is hoped that service can be rendered."

3. Errora to the Rescue

Gretchen stared. At first she thought that somehow, without a TV set, she must be seeing a TV picture. She knew it was possible to hear a radio station without a radio if you had braces on your teeth.

But Gretchen didn't have braces.

This little woman was dressed sort of like a mail carrier. Did the postal service have a special TV sender?

The woman cleared her throat. "This is Sector 87, isn't it? Aren't you the girl Gretchen?" There was a note of anxiety in her voice.

"How—how did you know my name?" Gretchen felt silly, talking to a TV picture.

"How?" The woman looked surprised. "You identified yourself in your call." She pushed a button on her calculator-like thing.

Gretchen heard a scratchy voice—could that be *her* voice? "Fairy godmother, come on! It's me, Gretchen!"

"And I, Errora, was on duty—so here I am." The little woman smiled uncertainly.

So this person (Errora?) had somehow overheard Gretchen. Maybe she had seen her crying, too. Gretchen felt her face burn. "It was none of your business."

"None of my—!" Errora looked crushed. Her lower lip began to tremble. "You don't want me to render assistance after all?"

Gretchen was afraid Errora might start crying, too. "I didn't mean that," she said hastily. "But—"

“Well, then.” Errora gave a happy sigh. “Here I am, ready to assess your situational obstacles and fix everything up just dandy—I mean, apply measures of a corrective nature, utilizing the resources of my Enchantulator.” She waved the calculator-like object.

“That’s very nice of you,” said Gretchen. She hesitated. Could Errora have escaped from a mental hospital? Maybe that’s why her uniform was too big for her—maybe it was really a guard’s uniform. Gretchen noticed the insignia sewn on Errora’s sleeve and on the front of her cap: a sparkling wand. She had gone to a lot of trouble to make Gretchen think she was her fairy godmother.

Anyway, it would hurt to tell her what Gretchen’s problem was. “I don’t think anyone can do anything for me, though. Mrs. Sheppard loves Amy and hates me, and she’s already picked Amy for the best part in the play.”

“Yes? Please continue.” Errora spoke in an important tone. “I must become aware of all the relevant factors before I can assess your situational obstacles.”

“Well . . .” Gretchen didn’t know what good it would do, but at least someone wanted to listen to her. “You see, every year the fifth grade in my school puts on a play. And there’s a new girl in my class, Amy, with long blonde hair. Everyone thinks she’s so wonderful. . . .” As Gretchen told her story, she began to tremble again, felt like screaming again. “. . . and I’ve been waiting for the play ever since I was in kindergarten! It’s not fair!” Her last words came out with a squeak.

Errora had been listening intently, fiddling with the keys on the thing she called her Enchantulator. Now she announced, “Problem: rival with long blonde hair. Solution—just a minute.” She punched one more key and peered at the display window. “Solution: abbreviatize.” She smiled triumphantly at Gretchen.

“Do what?” asked Gretchen blankly.

“Yes! Cut Amy’s hair. Then her power will be broken, and your teacher will reassign her part in the play to you.”

Errora was crazy, no doubt about it.

Still, Gretchen liked the idea of scissors shearing off Amy’s long blonde hair. “But she’d never let me do it.”

Errora smiled patiently. “You don’t have to do anything. Your problems are currently assigned to me and will be solved with the programmatic resources of my Enchantulator. All I need is a pictorial representation of your rival.”

“A picture of Amy? But I don’t—” Gretchen paused, remembering the newspaper picture of Amy. It would probably be in this morning’s paper, on the floor beside the rocker in the kitchen.

It couldn’t hurt to let Errora try.

“Hold on.” Gretchen dashed out of her bedroom.

Her mother, feeding Jason in his high chair, gave her a grateful look as Gretchen picked up the newspaper. “Thanks, darling. I’m glad I didn’t have to ask you to do that.”

Gretchen smiled sweetly and carried the paper to the garage, pausing to tear out Amy’s picture. Then she ran back through the kitchen and up to her bedroom again.

“Very good,” said Errora, looking closely at the picture. “Just hold it up at arm’s length in a stable manner”—she held up her own baggy-sleeved arm—“and relax while I chant.”

Breathless, Gretchen sat down on her bed and watched Errora thrust the Enchantulator out toward Amy’s picture. A beam of light shone from the edge of the instrument, playing back and forth across Amy’s waist-length hair. Errora chanted,

Although heretofore exhibiting hair of a lengthy nature,
She will be compelled to accept a certain curtailment.
And furthermore,
She will experience a diminished function of influence.

What is she saying? wondered Gretchen. It sounded like English, but she couldn’t understand half the words.

The beam of light flicked out. “Finalized,” said Errora in a satisfied voice. “No, don’t thank me now. I’ll come back tomorrow at the same time for a debriefing.”

“Wait.” Gretchen had a lot of questions to ask Errora, beginning with how she got into Gretchen’s room. Besides—“I can’t come right home from school! I have ballet class tomorrow afternoon.”

But Errora was gone, as if someone had switched off a projector.

Or—as if Gretchen had just awakened from a dream.

Thanks for reading this excerpt! If you liked the beginning of *Fifth Grade Magic*, you can buy the whole e-book at <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/9776>