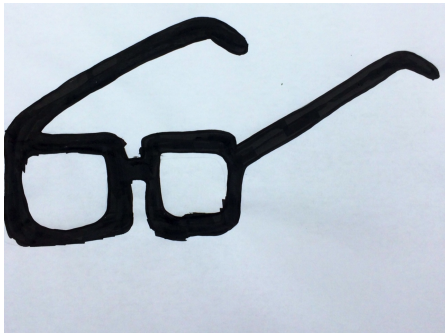


My Friend, Marco

(pictures by Clark International Course students)



When I was seven years old, I knew everything about everything. I knew the names of all the people who lived in my 32 house neighbourhood. I knew which dogs would bite and which wouldn't. I knew which trees you could steal apples from and which you couldn't. I also thought I knew this boy who lived across the street. His name was Marco. That's not a great name to have as a child. The other students all called him Marco Polio and ran away whenever he

walked towards them. Marco wore eye-glasses with heavy black frames. Sometimes Marco would start swinging his head back and forth really quickly for no reason. A few times his glasses flew right off his head and broke against the wall of the school.

I used to sit with Marco during lunch. He didn't say much. But when the lunch room got too noisy, he covered his ears with his hands and started singing the children's song *Row Row Row Your Boat* to himself. Anyway, Marco loved ants. He had a jar full of big black ants. During the summer, Marco used to sit in front of his house and stare at those ants for hours. He didn't wear a hat. He didn't move into the shade under the big tree in his front yard. He just sat there in the summer sun, his hair sticking up here and there, and stared at those ants.



One day, I went out and filled up my own jar with ants, only I collected the red kind. Red ants are terribly mean. They will bite a person for no good reason. And boy are they fast. I went up to Marco and said, "Want to try an experiment?" I said that the red ants were fast and good at fighting, but the black ants

were big and strong. I said we could mix them together and they would have babies and the babies would grow up to be a super red-black ant combination that was big, strong, fast and good at fighting. Marco wasn't really listening to me. He was still looking at his own jar of ants, with his mouth kind of half-opened. So I grabbed Marco's jar and took the lid off. Then I poured the ants out of my jar and into his. And those red ants just started attacking the black ants. They tore the black ants heads right off. Marco started pulling at his own hair and swinging his head back and forth so hard I thought that maybe his head was going to fall off too. He kept saying, "This is a tragedy. This is a tragedy"



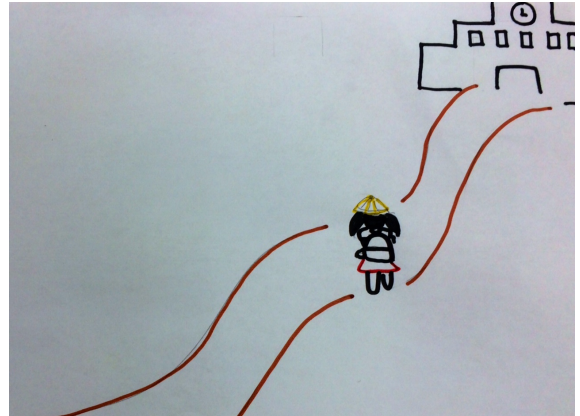
Marco also had the best tree to climb in the whole neighbourhood. But whenever I climbed the tree in Marco's yard, Marco always stayed down at the bottom. He never exactly said he didn't like climbing trees, but he never tried to climb a tree himself. One day I decided Marco really really needed to climb a tree. I thought it would be good for him, maybe help him to see the world in a different way. So I got under him and started pushing him up the trunk. Marco was saying no, no, no, no, no, no. And I kept saying, just go up, just go up, just go up. Then it was like an engine got turned on in Marco and he started climbing. He dug his hands right into the bark and pulled himself up and up and up. He climbed all the way up to the first branch, about 8

feet above my head. Then he just froze. He didn't say anything. He just sat up there with his eyes closed, his arms wrapped around the branch. I asked him to come down. I said I would give him all the money I had in my pocket, \$1.42. Finally, I started screaming at him, "come down here right now! Come on down you idiot! Come down!" I don't know how long I was out there screaming like that. But then I heard my mother calling for me to get home for dinner. And so I left. When I turned and looked back, I could see Marco still up in that damn tree.

I know it sounds like I was a pretty terrible child. But in my experience, all children are terrible. And anyway, I don't do things like that anymore. I have my own car shop. I'm a father. I have a seven year old daughter. I drive her 45 minutes to piano lessons. I read her books before she goes to sleep. Sometimes I tell her about what I used to do when I was her age. I tell her about the snowball fights we had, but not

about the blood dripping from Marcos' nose. I also don't tell her about those red ants. When I remember the small neighbourhood where I grew up, the white houses and cracked sidewalks, I can see Marco out of the corner of my imagination. He's still there, still up in that tree. He is still waiting for me to help him down. But I'm stuck here. On the other side of time. There is no way I can get back there. There is no way for me to say I'm sorry for all the things I did. Even worse, there is no way to say thank you.

When I watch my daughter walking to school in the morning, always by herself, always with her head down, I realise that Marco was the closest thing I had to a friend then. When I was seven years old, I thought I knew everything about everything. But really, I didn't know anything at all. I didn't even know that without Marco, I would have been alone every day of that long empty summer.



Vocabulary Profile: If the words 'jar' and 'ant' are pre-taught or glossed, 98.47 of the words fall within the NGSL (New General Service List) as profiled on the VP-Complete-Input Vocabulary Profiler (<http://www.lex tutor.ca/vp/comp/>) on Tom Cobb's Lextutor site (<http://www.lex tutor.ca>). The specific breakdown is:

984 words total

NGSL_1 (first 1000 lemmas): 91.20%

NGSL_2 (2nd and 1st 1000 lemmas): 96.22%

NGSL_3 (2nd and 1st 1000 lemmas plus additional 801 lemmas): 98.47%