

JUST ABOUT LIFE

10
VERY
SHORT STORIES

BY KEVIN STEIN

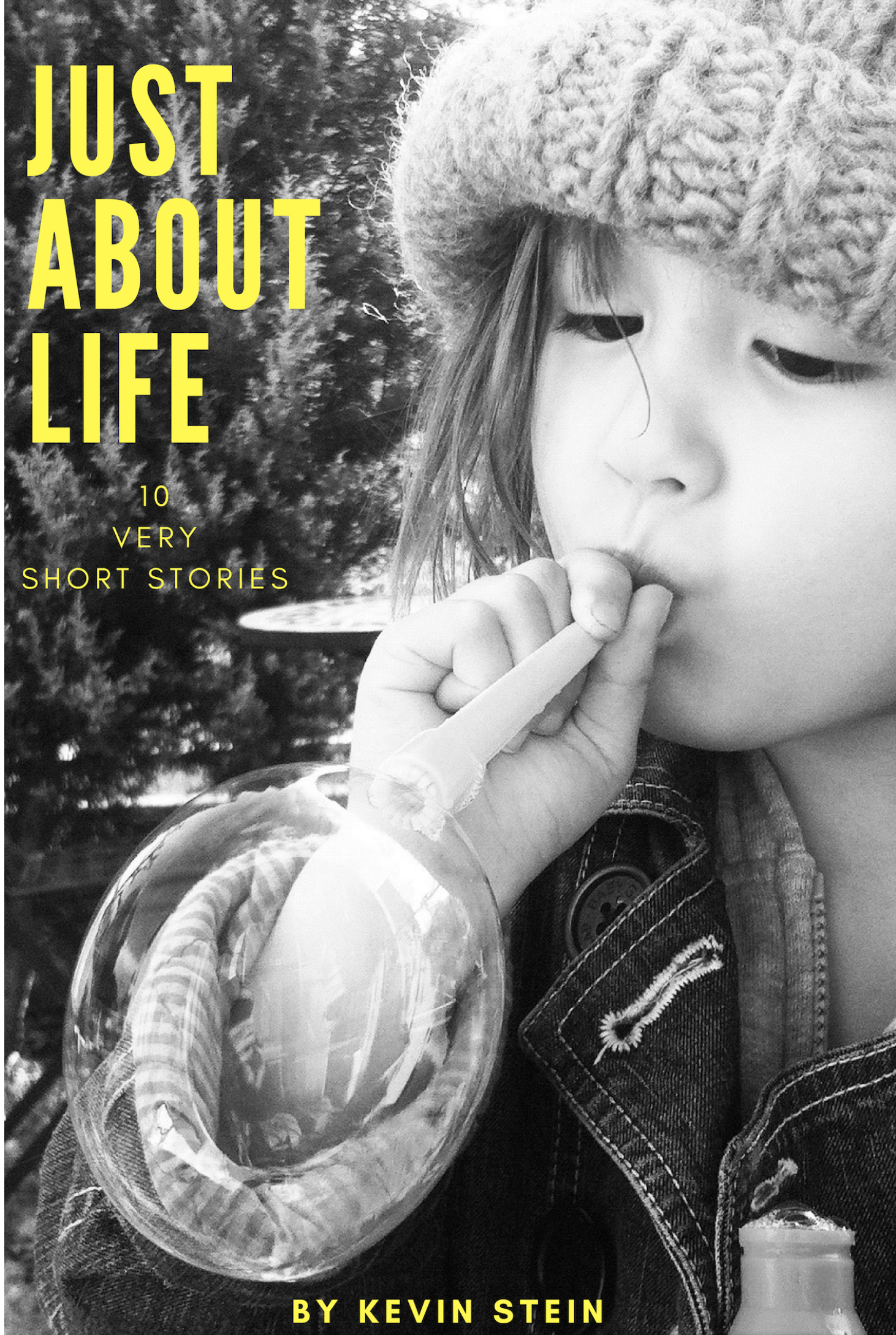


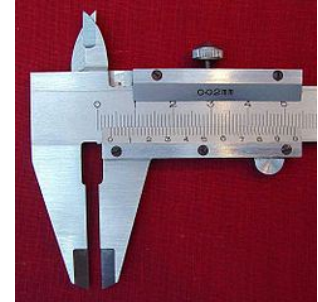
Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Measurements | 3 |
| For One Picture | 5 |
| Learning to Call | 7 |
| Strawberry Girl | 8 |
| How To Float | 10 |
| A name for all things | 11 |
| To Gather Up | 13 |
| The Closing of the Ocean | 14 |
| Below The Surface | 15 |
| My Friend, Marco | 17 |
| About the author | 19 |

Measurements

I like to measure things. I know exactly when it started. It was July 16, 2002. I was 7 years, 214 days, 3 hours and 6 seconds old. I was looking at an old wall clock in the living room. I said to my mother, "I'm hungry." She pointed to the clock. She said, "Dinner is in 10 minutes."

I watched the second hand move. 600 seconds later, I sat down at the dinner table. 34 seconds after that, I began to eat. I don't remember what we ate. But I do remember that it took me 1022 seconds to finish my meal. At the time, I was only 239,252,406 seconds old, but I knew something important. If you could measure time, time which you cannot see, or hear, or touch, or taste, you could measure everything. And I did.



I measured myself twice daily (currently 174 centimeters), how fast my mother talked (210 words per minutes), and how slowly my father walked up the stairs (1.3 kilometers per hour). It was after I entered high school that I began to measure things most people claimed could not be measured. For example, loneliness. Loneliness can be measured in eye contact. An average person who only looks into another person's eyes 37 times per day will feel lonely. When I was fourteen, I spent 62% of my days in loneliness. And fear, fear is when your heart beats 21.3% faster than average. I spent one month in fear, studying for my high school entrance examinations.

I had an old friend. Her name was Tammy. She used to hold my hand with 30 kilograms of force or 7 kilograms more than the average girl her age. Her eyes were blue. Color is a wave. The blue of her eyes was 472 nanometers long, which is the same as the ocean on an August afternoon. She told me that really, I could not measure anything. She said that 1 centimeter, 1 second, 1 kilogram were just ideas and did not really mean anything.

The day before we left for our separate universities, we ate in the best restaurant in town. We ate cake topped with gold leaf. The cake had 248 calories, enough to keep a body running for 3218.69 meters. She said goodbye to me 19 times. The last time she said goodbye, she looked down at a 37.4 degree angle. She did not look up when I said I would see her again soon.

At university, I learned to measure the electrical force of surprise, the speed of memory, and the time loss of confusion. I wrote papers which my friends did not read, but still said were wonderful. I moved into my own office on the first floor with a big window. But lately I think that maybe Tammy was right. Maybe measurements do not mean quite so much as I think. When Tammy used to talk to me, her breath smelled almost sweet. It was a special kind of smell. I think it might have been vanilla. But I cannot be sure. And I have no idea of how to measure a thing forgotten.

509 words total

98.00% within GSL (98.6% excluding proper nouns)

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 89.7

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 3.3

For One Picture

The girl's mother didn't say anything when the girl bought a motorcycle. She didn't say anything when the girl passed her driving test. She didn't even say anything as the girl packed. She just watched as her daughter put a few shirts into an old cloth bag and set a camera on top. But the next morning, as the girl was about to drive away, the mother finally said, "You are making a mistake. You should go to university."



Image info
CC: Jonathan Zander, [wikimedia files](#)

The girl closed her eyes. She looked as if she was counting to ten. Then she opened her eyes and smiled and said, "I'll be back as soon as I find one perfect picture." She was wearing a leather jacket. She kicked the bike's engine into life and raced away along Ginko Road. She raced away under the shade of the trees, getting smaller and smaller.

After few weeks a letter arrived for the girl's mother. The ink was blotted where rain drops had fallen on the paper. The girl wrote, "My bike is in great shape. It is the fastest thing I have ever known. The air here is different. It smells green and fresh, like someone has brushed everything clean." There was a picture. It was of a boy with no front teeth about to bite into an ear of corn. The girl's mother pinned it to the wall of her bedroom and looked at it before she went to sleep. She wondered how the boy could eat the corn with no teeth.

The girl's mother went to the crowded Thursday market to buy cheap fruits and vegetables. She listened to her favorite radio program on Sunday afternoons. She played cards with her friends. And she waited for another letter. It came when the leaves were turning from red to brown. There was no note in the envelope, just a photograph. It was a picture of a man smoking a cigarette. He was standing in a shop window and hanging a yellow dress on a manikin. The picture made the girl's mother laugh. But she didn't know why. She hung it next to the first picture.

When the snow fell, the girl sent a picture of one of the fishing woman from the north islands. The fishing woman was holding a heavy net full of shells. The fishing woman looked strong and young, but she was probably older than the girl's mother. More pictures arrived. A mountain of old bicycles reflecting the afternoon sun. A little girl with only one leg jumping rope in the street. The mother pinned each picture to the wall. She took them down and looked at them every night. She thought the pictures were beautiful. She thought that maybe they were perfect. But she began to hope that maybe they were

not. She began to hope that maybe there were so many more beautiful things in the world. She began to wonder how her own daughter had become the kind of person who might be able to find them.

499 words total

97.5% within GSL (98.6% excluding proper nouns)

Flesch Reading Ease score: 94.8

Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level: 3

Learning to Call Something from Nothing

There was a girl who loved to blow bubbles. Every morning before she went to school she ran into the garden and blew bubbles. In the winter, she wore a heavy coat. In the summer, she didn't wear shoes and her hair was cut short. Every afternoon, when school ended, she ran home and blew bubbles again. Her mother was worried. She said, "It's strange." The girl's father said, "What's wrong with bubbles?" The girl's father and mother did not understand each other very well.



One day the girl blew a bubble, but there was something different about it. The girl looked at it floating in front of her. It was square. That whole summer, the girl blew square bubbles. As she got older, she learned to blow triangles and half circles. By the time she was in high school, she could put the shapes together and make trees and houses, cars and buses. She could make whole little towns floating through the air.

The girl didn't join clubs. She didn't play sports. Her mother was still worried, but the girl studied enough to keep her teachers happy. And she kept her bubbles a secret. She couldn't say why she kept it a secret. The girl became a woman. She could now blow bubbles of cats, dogs, and horses that ran through the air. She worked as a designer at a small clothing company. Her clothes were simple, clean, and very popular.

Years later, she sat in her own garden, with her own children, and her own husband. Her daughter was holding a small green wand in one hand and a small bottle of soap in the other. The woman reached out and took the bottle and wand from her daughter. It was a late spring day. The sky was darkening. The woman dipped the wand in the soap and held it to her mouth. She whispered something. It sounded like a prayer. One perfect butterfly, purple against the evening sky floated free and up. The butterfly waved its wings slowly. It passed in front of a white moon. It disappeared in an instant. Her son, a boy of three who liked to break things, asked his mother to teach him how to make a butterfly. The woman's daughter, who was a quiet girl and understood more than her brother, did not ask anything. She already knew. You did not make anything in this world. You worked until you found the right way to call for what you needed. If you were lucky, the call was answered.

436 words total

96.33% within GSL

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 90

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 3.1

Strawberry Girl

Her name was Mari, but everyone in town called her Strawberry Girl. She had a small face and her nose wrinkled when she got angry. As a child, she had picked strawberries freely from the neighbors' fields. She had eaten until her lips were a deep red. Most of the people in town were farmers, but Mari's family did not grow anything. Her father was a high school teacher. Her mother was a nurse. And from Monday, Mari was going live in Tokyo and start her life as a university student.

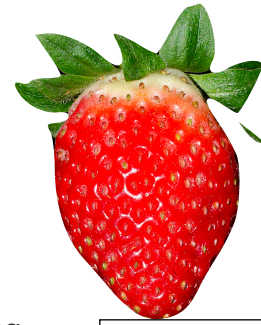


Image info to
GFDK1.2: Prathyush
Thomas. [wikimedia](#)

When Mari had turned eleven years old, she had started working on the neighbor's farm in the summer. She had helped pick strawberries. She had been careful with the fruit, twisting and pulling it from the plant gently. At the end of the day, Mari's ankles had been stained green and her face deep brown from the sun. She had worked every summer until she had turned fifteen. That summer, her parents had sent her to a special school so she could study for the university entrance examinations. At the time, Mari had thought it had been a kind of punishment. She had not been able to see what a test, so far in the future, had to do with her summers in the fields.

On the Saturday before Mari left for university, Mr. Yamada, the neighbor, was waiting for Mari and her mother at the gate. His hair was white. He had small lines all around his eyes. It was early morning, but the sun was already hot. Mari wore long white gloves to protect her skin. She and her mother wore large straw hats. Mr. Yamada smiled and handed them each a large basket. Mari's mother tried to give him some money, but Mr. Yamada just laughed until Mari's mother put the money back in her pocket. He said, "Our Strawberry Girl's going away."

Mari showed her mother how to pick the strawberries, but her mother was no good at it. Her mother pulled hard and the fruit broke free of the stem. Mari explained how the fruit ripened too quickly with no stem. Her mother called her, "Professor Strawberry Girl." Her mother bent from the waste to pick the fruit. She ate more strawberries than she picked. Mari never bent over. Instead, she kneeled down in front of a plant and picked only the largest, reddest fruit. She slowly filled her basket. The sun warmed her head through her hat. Somewhere, two birds were singing to each other. She thought about the cake she was going to make in the evening.

Someone called her name. No, not her name. Someone called out, "Strawberry Girl, Strawberry Girl." It was Mr. Yamada's youngest son. He ran easily across the field. He stopped in front of Mari and her mother and held something out to them. It was a red and white can of condensed milk. The boy was wearing an old blue hat. His skin was very

dark. His teeth were very white. He told Mari's mother to put the condensed milk on the strawberries if she liked sweet things. The boy swept his hand out across the field. "Eat as many as you like," he said. He ran off. Mari waited for him to look back, but he just kept running.

Mari poured some milk onto a strawberry for her mother. The white of the cream was shocking against the deep red of the fruit. Her mother tasted it and clapped her hands in delight. Mari put a drop of white onto a strawberry for herself. She took a bite. But it tasted sour. It was the taste of something still green inside. The taste of something not quite ready.

Mari didn't make a cake that night. She said she felt tired from being out in the sun for so long. She went to Tokyo on Saturday, a day earlier than planned. She left all the strawberries on the kitchen table. There were too many for her mother to eat. Some went bad in an early April heat wave.

670 words total

93.3% of words within GSL. (97.9% excluding proper nouns)

Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease Score: 93.2

Flesch Kincaid Grade Level: 2.7

How To Float

There is a town I know. It is not a big town. Actually, it is quite small. In every way, it is a very ordinary town. There are 2 convenience stores. There is a library with a large collection of thick and serious books. There is an old handmade ice-cream shop. And the people who live in the town seem ordinary when you first meet them. They smile and say, “Good morning,” in the morning. They wave and say, “See you later,” at the end of the day. They wear blue jeans and t-shirts and laugh at jokes.



Image info
CC BY-SA 3.0: [Peter nussbaumer, wikimedia](#)

But for all of that, they are quite different from you and me. The people in the town are always floating an inch or two off the ground. They float, but the people of the town cannot fly. At least I have never seen them fly. They just float above the sidewalk. And only a little. It is very easy to notice them floating when they get on a bus. Instead of climbing the stairs, they just float up into the bus.

I lived in the town for one year. I was a science teacher at the high school. Every day I went to school and taught my science classes. One day, I asked my best student, Chad, why all the people in town floated. He was a clever boy with light brown hair and lots of freckles on his nose. He laughed and said he didn't know. I hoped that if I lived in the town, if I drank the town's water, if I made friends with people in the town, I would start to float, too. But I never did.

After one year my girlfriend and I decided to get married. She lived in New York. So I moved. Before I moved, Chad gave me a letter, but said I shouldn't open it until I was married. The day after my wedding I pulled out the letter and read it. It said, “We float, because we know this town is our only home. We float because we know that we will never leave. That is the secret.” I looked across the table at my new wife. I thought about my new life. I knew just what Chad meant.

378 words total

96.88% of words within GSL. (97.9% excluding proper nouns)

Flesh-Kincaid grade level: 4

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease Score: 81

A name for all things

My grandma could give a name to anything. On the corner of the one small park near my house, there was a strong looking walnut tree. My grandma always hit its trunk and called it 'Big Daddy Caramel'. Soon, so did everyone else.



One summer, a great cloud of butterflies landed in the empty lot behind our house. A few hours later they flew off, leaving one behind. One bright orange butterfly with round wings. My grandma called it 'Little Lost Tomato-Chan'. Even now, when I walk through a summer garden, I wonder if that butterfly ever found its way home.

My grandma was old before I was born. Her hair was silver. Her eyes were light blue with a touch of white here and there. But I never thought of her as old. She called me 'Sugar', 'Spring a Whistling', and 'Bitter Tea'. Whatever name she used, it was always right. The right name for how I was feeling deep on the inside.

My mother was a nurse. She was a good nurse. She came home at night and could hardly stand. She worked for 16 hours in a row. And my grandma called her 'Keep on Walking' and 'Cheer Full of Empty'. But sometimes it was all too hard. On those days my mother came home and went right to bed. Sometimes she didn't even say hello to me or my grandma. She just pulled the covers to her chin like a curtain coming down on her day. On those nights, my grandma would sit next to my mother's bed. She would stroke my mother's hair. She didn't call my mother any fancy names. She just called her 'Baby' and my mother would cry and fall asleep.

The only name my grandma gave I didn't like was to my first boyfriend. She called him 'Mr. World Of Trouble'. She said it right to his face. He was a big boy with almost no brains. He got so mad, I thought he was going to hit my grandma. But he just walked out of the house. And I stopped seeing him. He ended up killing two men in a bank robbery. He sure was Mr. World of Trouble.

When my grandma was 84 years old, she got sick. The doctors tried to find out what was wrong with her. They checked her heart. They checked her lungs. But she got thinner and thinner. Her skin was so pale you could see right through it. She was in the hospital for three days and her breathing got soft, like falling snow.

The day she died, she was talking to me. The sunlight was falling into the room like a promise. My grandma was telling me how the doctors were all wrong. For a while she had been lost. She hadn't known how to put a name to what was happening to her. But she had had some time to think about it. Time to think about her life. 84 years of life. And she

had a name for this thing that was happening to her now. She looked at me, little spots of white floating like a hint of something far away in her eyes. 'Cracked Tea Cup Full of Joy' she whispered to me. The secret name of the slow goodbye that is life.

556 words total

98.19% of words within GSL

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 2.89

Flesch Reading Ease Level: 93.47

To Gather Up

I live in Lone Temple, a small town surrounded by a ring of mountains. I am the town's station master. Not that it's much of a train station. Just two tracks, one platform, and two freshly painted benches. I paint the benches myself twice every year. This year in the fall I painted them sunrise orange. Last week, I painted them tear drop blue. Sometimes someone will notice and say something nice about the color, and that makes me feel pretty good.



During a Lone Temple winter, there is snow and more snow. Every year the neighborhood children build a snowman in front of the station. Each year there are less and less children, but they manage to get the job done. This January they built a real giant of a snowman. It took them all day and it was already dark when they finished and ran home. It was a cold evening and there was a touch of salt in the wind. Suddenly, I felt sorry for the snowman. He was out there, left behind, and probably already forgotten. So I dug through the Lost and Found box and pulled out a bright red knit cap. I had to stand on a step ladder to put the hat on the snowman's head. The snowman had a strange half smile made out of grey rocks. I thought he looked a little more comfortable with the hat on.

There is always something to do at a train station. There's always a floor to sweep, a weed to pull, a sign to straighten. But there is also nothing that must absolutely be done right now at a station. And this is also good. I can make a cup of coffee and watch the steam curl up towards the ceiling. I can set a small plate of smoked fish down behind the worn row of lockers and wait to see which cat comes to eat it first. In this way time passes.

It was a long winter and the snowman didn't really start melting until the beginning of April. He got a little smaller every day and by May first, he was gone. I went out, picked up the bright red hat from the ground, and started to put it back in the lost and found box. I looked at the long pair of soft leather gloves, the folding umbrella with the bent handle, the pack of faded playing cards, the loose collection of keys and broken watches and I changed my mind. I put the hat in the bottom drawer of my desk instead. It wasn't a lost thing anymore. At least, not for a little while longer. Not as long as there were still enough children to gather up the snow that was sure to fall in the winter.

470 words total

Words contained in the GSL: 96.63%

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 96.2

Flesch-Kincaid Grade level: 3.2

The Closing of the Ocean

During the first week of November, all the police officers leave their clean pressed uniforms on the front steps of their houses. Anyone in town is free to pick them up, put them on, and see what it is like, this work of being an officer of the law. But this year the uniforms were left untouched. It was the first time.



My brother and I are sitting in the coffee shop on Heart Street. I pour some milk in my coffee. My brother drinks his black. My brother is a police officer. Lately his eyes get kind of empty when he talks about work, which isn't often.

My brother is in charge of keeping people off the beach at night. Too many accidents of late, so they decided to close down the ocean until summer. Even put up a white sign with big red letters. The sign reads, "Ocean Closed Until Further Notice." And my brother is the one who makes sure it stays shut down nice and tight. I imagine him, walking on the sand, spending his nights making sure that no one is breathing in the salty air. No one is looking and looking at the dark water as the lights of fishing boats flash on and off. No one is counting the rocks shining like bones in the moonlight.

My brother takes the last sip of his coffee. "A few weeks ago, we had a big problem," he says and shakes his head. "A bunch of old men, big Russians with big chests, decided to take a quick swim. I had to pull them out of the water one by one. Big steaming men acting like children." My brother looks in his cup like there might be an answer at the bottom. "And then they just walked away. They didn't say anything. Just walked away like it was all my fault."

Now it is February. Soon enough winter will end. Soon enough the ocean will be open again. My brother looks at the clock. It's almost seven. "I've got to go close down the ocean," my brother says and stands up. As if it actually means something, this idea of closing the ocean. But maybe it does. Maybe it means something important. And not only to my brother.

In November this year, the police officers' uniforms remained where they had been placed, untouched. They just sat there, waiting. It was the first time. But every night the beach was filled. Filled with footprints. Filled with the whispers of lovers trying to hold on to a few more moments. Filled with kids laughing like they already had a hundred tomorrows rolled up tight and put away safely in their pockets, saved up for the coming of spring.

457 words total

96.84% of words within GSL

Flesch Reading Ease score: 88.7

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 3.6 (~9 years old)

Below The Surface

Thomas wanted someone to give him a nickname. He wanted people to call him Tommy or Tom-Tom or Little-T. But nobody ever did. Everybody just called him Thomas. He lived with his mother in three small rooms close to the ocean. He didn't know where his father was and his mother never talked about him. When Thomas felt lonely, he went to the ocean and swam.



The summer he turned seven, Thomas discovered he could hold his breath for a long time. He liked to stay down under the waves and count. By the time he was ten, he could count to two hundred without coming up. Eventually he stopped counting. He just took a long breath and swam as deep as he could. There was coral down at the bottom. There were blue fish that swam over the rocks like little flashes of lightening. There was even a lionfish, with long whiskers around its face. Thomas thought it looked very wise. Sometimes Thomas asked it questions which had no answers.

While he was swimming, Thomas could hear the waves moving above him. It was like someone singing a song that changed with the light or the wind. One day, when Thomas was fifteen years old, he took a deep breath and swam down until his ears began to hurt. The water got dark and the current felt like a cold wind. There, at the bottom of the ocean, was a telephone box resting in the sand. It leaned slightly to the left. Inside the box was an old phone, the black kind with a round dial. Thomas picked up the receiver. Even in the water, it felt heavy in his hand. He held it to his ear. There was noise coming from the receiver. It was an even hum, like an invitation to make a call. But Thomas had no one he wanted to call.

The day Thomas graduated high school, it was cloudy. When he got to the beach, it started raining. The raindrops hit his skin like the tap of small drumsticks. He took a quick breath and dove down into the water. He was about to head back up when there was a sound, like a faint bell ringing. It was a call. It was a phone call for him. But the phone box was still far away. As he swam, Thomas started counting the rings. Ten rings. He kicked faster. Twenty rings. He stretched out his arms. Twenty-five rings. He pulled himself down.

When Thomas reached the phone, his head was getting light. He grabbed the receiver and held it up to his ear. There was a noise, like a cough, from the other side. But it was too late. The ocean was a hand wrapped around his chest. There was nothing left in Thomas' lungs but the ache to breathe. He let go of the receiver and kicked for the surface. As he swam up, he thought he heard a man call out, "Tommy, is that you?" But he wasn't sure. And even if someone he knew from long ago called out to him, what could he say? He was a young man who talked to lionfish. He listened to the song of the waves. What he needed was a new language, a language to share the things he had come to know now.

563 words total

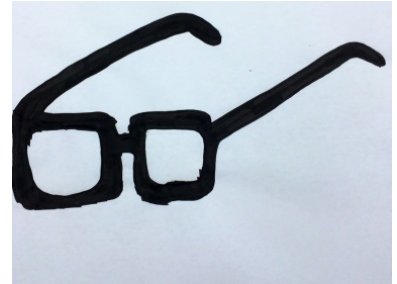
97.87% of words within GSL

Flesch Kincaid Grade Level: 2.99

Flesch Reading Ease: 90.63

My Friend, Marco

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 neighborhood. 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."

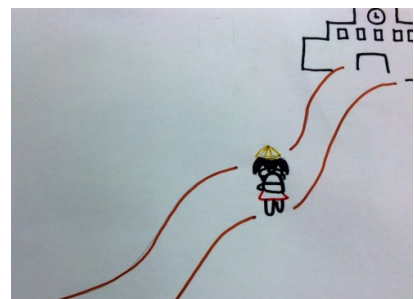
Marco also had the best tree to climb in the whole neighborhood. But whenever I climbed the tree in Marco's yard, Marco always stayed down at the bottom. He never exactly said

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. 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 neighborhood 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 realize 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.



984 words total
98.47% 97.87% of words within GSL

About the author

Kevin Stein is a teacher and a program manager. He works at Clark Memorial International High School. His areas of professional interest include how to use standardized tests to help students develop autonomous learning skills and the effective use of literature in language teaching.

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